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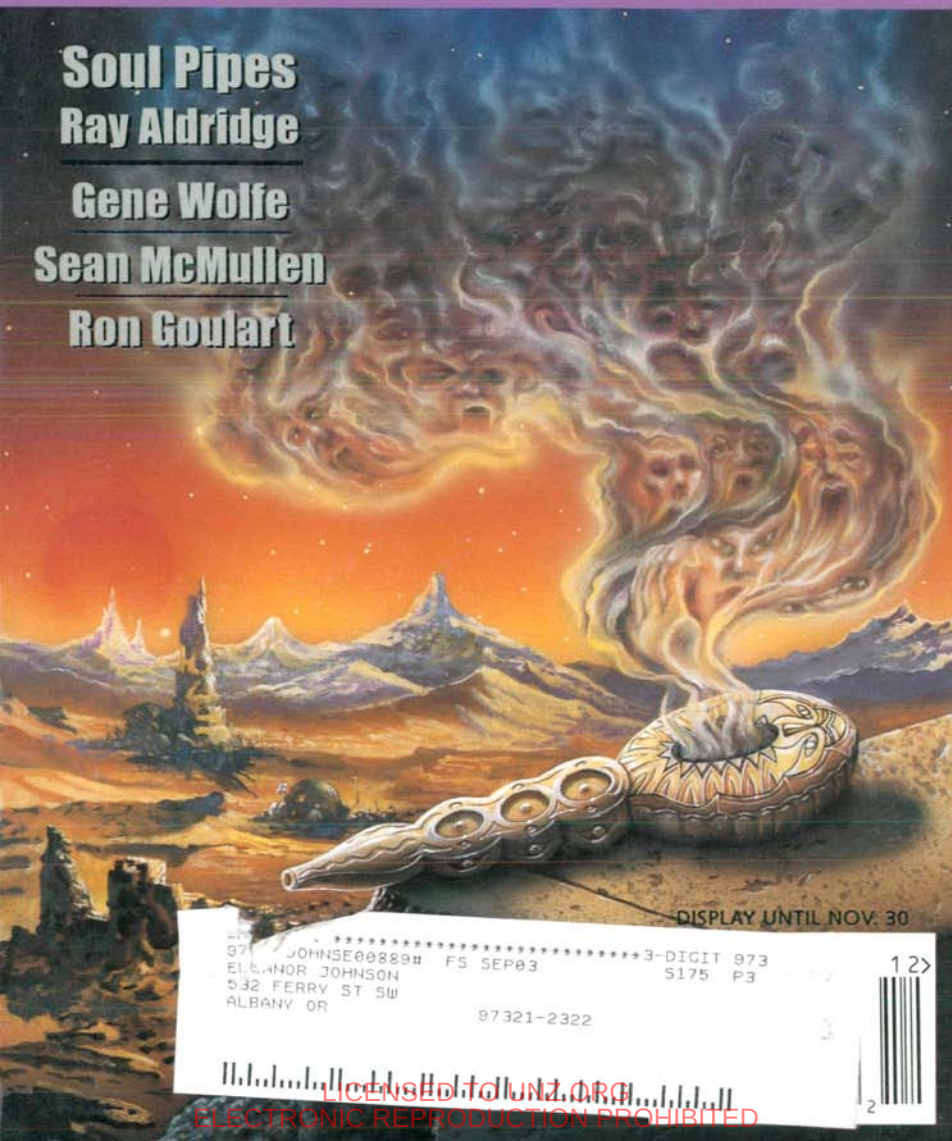

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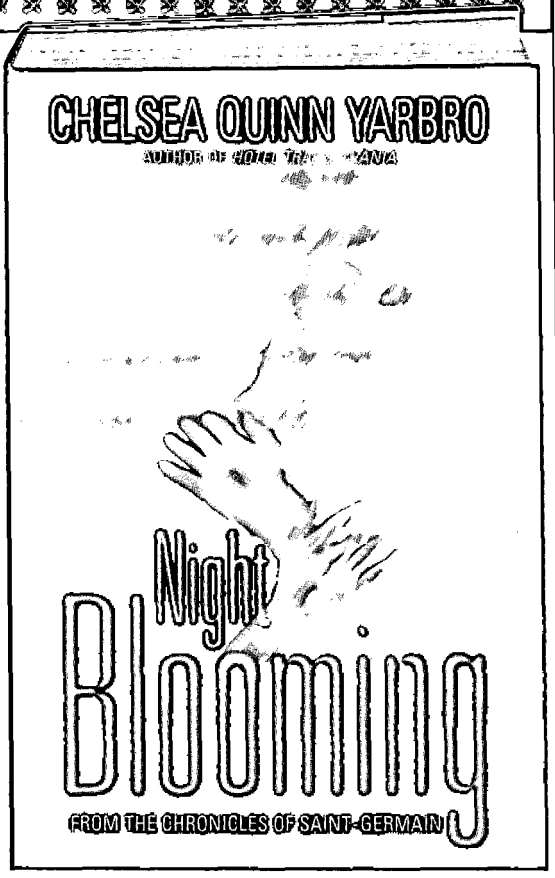

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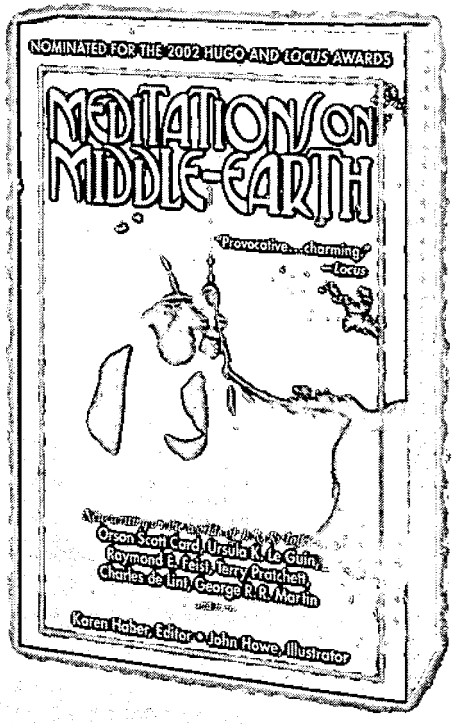
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Sean McMullen's recent work includes the novels Souls in the Great Machine, The Miocene Arrow, *and* Eyes of the Calculor. *His latest fantasy novel, a story about a wind-powered submarine entitled* Voyage of the Shadowmoon, *should be in the bookstores by the time this issue comes out. He brings us now a puzzle story concerning an undergraduate student in Spain brought in to reckon with the impossible.*

Walk to the Full Moon

By Sean McMullen

MEAT WAS BOUGHT AT A high price by the Middle Pleistocene hominids of the Iberian Peninsula. Large prey meant more meat, yet large prey was very dangerous. The pressure to hunt was unrelenting, for the hominids were almost entirely carnivorous, but the people lived well because their technology was the most advanced in the world.

It is unusual for a linguist to be called for in a murder investigation, especially an undergraduate linguist. Had my Uncle Arturo not been in charge, and had I not been staying at his house at the time, I would not have become involved at all. He told me little as he escorted me into the Puerto Real clinic and took me to a meeting room.

On a monitor screen was a girl in a walled garden. Crouching in a corner, she had a fearful, hunted look about her. I could see that she wore a blanket, that her skin was olive-brown, and that her features were bold and heavy, but not unattractive. Somehow, it took a while for me to notice the most remarkable thing about her: she had no forehead!

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"Who — I mean *what* is she?" I exclaimed.

"That's what a lot of people want to know," replied my uncle. "I think she is a feral girl with a deformed head. She was found this morning, on a farm a few kilometers north of here."

"Has she said anything?" I asked, then added, "Can she talk?"

"Carlos, why do you think I called you? This is a clinic where the staff are quite good at dealing with tourists who don't speak Spanish, but this girl's language stopped them cold."

"So she does speak?"

"She seems to use words, that is why you are here. Before you ask, she is locked in the walled garden at the center of the clinic because she can't stand being indoors. We need to communicate with her, but we also need discretion. Someone senior in the government is involved. DNA tests are being done."

I was about to commence my third year at university, studying linguistics. Being continually short of money, I would drive my wreck of a motor scooter down to Cádiz every summer, stay with my uncle, rent a board and go windsurfing. By now I owed Uncle Arturo for three such holidays, and this was the first favor he had asked in return. My mind worked quickly: love child of government minister, hit on the head, abandoned in the mountains, DNA tests being done to establish the parents' identities.

"There are better linguists than I," I said.

"But I know I can trust you. For now we need total discretion."

I shrugged. "Okay, what do I do?"

"She must be hungry. When a blackbird landed in the garden she caught it and ate it. Raw."

I swallowed. She sounded dangerous.

"Maybe you could help her build a fire, roast a joint of meat," my uncle suggested.

"Me?" I exclaimed. "Cook a roast? I've never even boiled an egg."

"Well then, time to learn." He laughed, without much mirth.

It turned out that I had three advantages over the clinic's staff and my uncle's police: long hair, a beard, and a calf-length coat. It made me look somehow reassuring to the girl, but days passed before I realized why.

* * *

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I entered the garden with a bundle of wood and a leg of lamb. The girl's eyes followed me warily. I stopped five meters from her and sat down. I put a hand on my chest and said, "Carlos." She did not reply. I shrugged, then began to pile twigs together in front of me. The girl watched. I reached into a pocket, took out a cigarette lighter, and flicked it alight. The girl gasped and shrank back against the wall. To her it probably looked as if the flame was coming out of my fist. Calmly, I lit the twigs, slipped the lighter back into my pocket, and piled larger sticks onto the fire.

My original plan had been to roast the meat, then gain the girl's trust by offering her some. I placed the leg in the flames — but almost immediately she scampered forward and snatched it out.

"Butt!" she snapped, leaving no doubt that the word meant something like *fool*.

I shrugged and sat back, then touched my chest again and said, "Carlos."

This time she returned the gesture and said, "Els."

Els stoked the fire until a bed of coals was established. Only now did she put the joint between two stones, just above the coals. Fat began to trickle down and feed the flames. We shared a meal of roast lamb around sunset and I collected about two dozen words on the dictaphone in my pocket, mostly about fire, meat, and sticks. Els began to look uneasy again. I had made a fire, I had provided meat, and it was fairly obvious what she expected next.

I stood up, said, "Carlos," then gestured to the gate and walked away. The perplexity on Els's face was almost comical as I watched the video replay a few minutes later.

"What have you learned so far?" asked my uncle as the debriefing began.

Two other people were present; they had been introduced as Dr. Tormes and Marella. The woman was in her thirties and quite pretty, while Tormes was about ten years older.

"Firstly, Els trusts me a little," I pointed out.

"I thought she was supposed to accept you as another prisoner," said my uncle.

"She doesn't understand the idea of being a prisoner," I replied. "She

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calls me Carr. Loss is her word for fire. For her Carlos seems to be *Carr who makes fire.*"

"So, you made a fire after introducing yourself as a firemaker," said Tormes.

"Yes. All her words are single syllable, and she has not spoken a sentence more than five words long. Intonation and context seem important in her language, though."

"You say language," said Uncle Arturo. "Is it a genuine language?"

"It depends what you mean by genuine. Any linguist could invent a primitive language, but Els has a fluency that would only come with years of use. Do we know *anything* about her?"

My uncle glanced to Tormes and Marella.

"Els is just a feral girl with a severely deformed skull," said Tormes. "Perhaps she was abandoned in the mountains while very young, and animals reared her."

"Animals could never have taught her such a language," I replied. "Animals don't have fire, either."

They glanced uncomfortably at each other, but volunteered no more information.

We let Els spend the night by herself, then at dawn the three orderlies were sent in to seize her. Moments later I entered the garden, loaded with more firewood and meat, and armed with a sharpened curtain rod. I made a show of driving off the orderlies after an extended bout of shouting, and fortunately Els did not seem to have any concept of acting. I was treated like a genuine hero as we settled down to another day together. While we talked Els began to make stone knives and scrapers out of the garden's ornamental rocks. She even charred the end of my curtain rod in the fire and scraped it into a lethal-looking, fire-hardened point. Again I left her at sunset and went through a long debriefing with my uncle, Marella, and Tormes.

"If Els was raised by wild sheep or rabbits, how did she learn to make stone tools and fire-hardened spear points?" I asked with undisguised sarcasm.

"We are as puzzled as you," replied Tormes calmly.

On the morning of the third day I returned with a newly slaughtered

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sheep. Els skinned and butchered it with great skill, using her newly made stone knives and scrapers. It was only now that Els actually approached me. Coming around to my side of the fire, she rubbed mutton fat through my hair, then pinned it back with blackbird feathers. By now I had learned to say "Di," which seemed to cover both *thanks* and *sorry*. Over the next half hour, she made me understand that although I was skinny, she thought I was very brave to go hunting at night.

T THE DEBRIEFING on the fifth day I had an audience of a dozen people, two of whom I recognized from the Department of Anthropology in the university in Madrid. It took only a minute to walk the tens of thousands of years from the garden to the committee room.

"I now have over a hundred words," I reported. "I can communicate with Els fairly well, and she has answered a few questions. She talks about a tribe. They call themselves the Rhuun, and they have *always* lived here."

"What?" exclaimed Tormes. "Impossible."

"I'm only telling you what Els said. They have a detailed calendar, and a counting system based on the number twenty."

"Ten fingers and ten toes," said Marella.

"Did she do your hair?" asked one of the new observers.

"Yes. Grooming seems to be a bonding ritual for the Rhuun, and possibly a precursor to sexual activity as well," I explained.

"So she made a pass at you," laughed my uncle. Nobody else laughed.

"She has been removed from her tribe for the first time in her life," I added.

"Then you are her new provider," said Tormes. "She may be feeling insecure because you are not mating with her."

This time a few snickers rippled around the table.

"Look, this was not in the job description," I said to my uncle, scowling.

"Besides, she might be disappointed," he replied, and this time everyone really did laugh.

"From now on you will return to her after a couple of hours each night, and pretend you were lucky with your hunting," Tormes hurriedly

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advised, seeing the expression on my face. "Just having you nearby at night should gain her trust."

"But seriously, stay on your own side of the fire," advised my uncle. "Technically she's a ward of the state, and probably a minor."

When the meeting broke up Marella and Tormes invited me to join them for a coffee before I returned to Els. Wearing my long coat over jeans and a T-shirt, but with my hair still greased and pinned back with feathers, I felt quite out of place. The café was across the road from the clinic, and was about as sterile. Most people think of Cádiz as a pretty little port with more history than some countries, but this was Puerto Real, the messy industrial fringe of the holiday city that visitors barely notice as they drive through. Whatever the setting, it was my first filtered coffee for many days and I was very grateful for it. I also ordered a large salad. A man named Garces joined us, but he said little at first.

"There's more to Els than you think," said Tormes after I ordered another cup.

"You underestimate me," I replied.

"What *do* you think?"

"Had they not been extinct for thirty thousand years, I'd say she was Neanderthal. Even her stone tools look very like what I've seen in museums."

"Not Neanderthal," said Marella.

"Sorry?"

"Els's tools are relatively primitive, more like those of the Neanderthals' ancestor species, *Homo heidelbergensis*," Tormes explained.

"I don't know much about paleoanthropology," I said, although I knew that half a dozen species of hominids have lived in Spain over the past two million years.

"The heidelbergensians were around for six hundred thousand years," said Tormes, as if he were speaking for a television documentary. "They were the first hominids to use advanced technology like clothing, artificial shelters, and probably language. There is a cave in the north called the Pit of Bones where they even ritually disposed of their dead. They lived in an ice-age environment that would have killed any hominid that did not use clothing. They were once the brightest people ever, and they had the

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most advanced technology on Earth for longer than *Homo sapiens* has existed. Their cranial capacity actually overlapped with the modern human average, but they were also phenomenally strong."

I had by now noticed that Els could break branches that were way beyond my strength. Perhaps there was more to this than a hoax.

"You talk as if Els is a real cave girl," I said casually.

"She is," said Garces.

At this point a waiter arrived with my second coffee. I took a few sips while the waiter cleaned up and removed some cups and dishes. My mind was screaming that Garces was mad, yet he lacked the manic enthusiasm of genuine nut cases. He almost looked unhappy. The waiter left, skillfully balancing a pile of plates and cups on one arm.

"The girl's DNA is not human," Garces continued. "True, it has more in common with human DNA than that of an ape, but there are not enough base pairs in common with human DNA for her to interbreed with, say, yourself."

"Take that back!" I snapped, already near my limit with this onslaught of weirdness.

"Sorry, sorry," he said at once. "I have been rather unsettled by all this, and...." He scratched his head. "Look, what I have found is impossible, but I have done my tests in good faith. The base pair comparisons that I ran give Els's DNA more in common with that of Neanderthals than *Homo sapiens*, but examination of DNA mutation sites and rates suggests that she could be from the Neanderthals' ancestral species."

"There was also semen found on a vaginal swab," said Tormes.

"Indeed!" said Garces. "Its DNA was of the same species. Els's husband, lover, or whatever is another heidelbergensian. He is also a blood relative, from perhaps three generations back, but this is not unknown in small and isolated tribes."

There was silence as I sipped my coffee. Almost before I knew it, my cup was empty. Apparently, I was expected to say something.

"Genetic engineering was around in the early 1990s, when Els would have been born," I suggested, seriously out of my depth and well aware of it.

"Balls," replied Garces wearily, as if he had heard the suggestion too many times over the past few days. "That's like saying that Nazi Germany

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put men in space, just because they had primitive rockets. Even today we can't engineer genetic changes on the scale found in the subject's DNA."

"Her name is Els," I insisted.

"Yes, yes, Els. Whatever her name, she — "

"She's the victim of some cruel genetic hoax!" I began angrily.

"Haven't you been listening?" Garces demanded, banging his fists on the table.

"Yes, and to get back to your analogy, the Nazis flew at least two types of manned rocket, and they drew up designs for manned spacecraft as well. I saw a documentary on television, the Nazis put rockets into space big enough to carry a man — "

"All right, all right, Nazis in space is a bad analogy," he conceded, waving his hands. "The point is that we have *never* had the skills to make the massive changes to human DNA that I have observed in, er, Els. Yes, we could fool about with bits and pieces of the genome and clone the occasional sheep in the 1990s, but not create a new race — or should I say re-create an old one."

"But Els is a fact," I insisted. "Genetics only proves — "

"This isn't *just* genetics!" said Garces sharply. "Els has stepped straight out of the Middle Pleistocene! She has practically no radioactive contaminants in her tissues from nuclear bomb tests or the Chernobyl fallout. Her levels of industrial contaminants like dioxin also suggest that she had been eating food grown in this century for only two weeks."

"I don't understand," I admitted.

"Els and her tribe are genuine," said Marella. "That girl in the clinic across the road is an ice age hominid, she is *from* the ice age."

That was a conversation stopper if ever there was one. For a time we sat staring at each other, saying nothing. The waiter returned. We all ordered more coffee.

"Are you willing to put that in a press release?" I asked once we were alone again.

"Young man, if I had been unfaithful to my husband I would not want it in a press release, whether it was true or not," interjected Marella, almost in a snarl. "Not unless it was a matter of life and death, anyway. Before we all go making fools of ourselves with public statements, we need to know Els's side of the story."

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Tormes looked particularly uncomfortable, and Garces squirmed. Marella glared at me until I stared down at the table. She was clearly used to taking no nonsense from any man, whether plumber or prime minister.

"All their pelt cloaks are new sheepskin, and their scrapers are new," said Tormes. "Their spears have been cut from modern hawthorne stands."

"You mean you have evidence of a whole tribe?" I exclaimed.

Yet again there was silence. Tormes had said too much in the heat of the moment.

"I think we have said enough," suggested Marella coldly. "Carlos, what do you have to say about Els — as a linguist?"

I was annoyed but cautious. The body language displayed by Tormes and Garces suggested that they were treating Marella very carefully. Her face was familiar, in a way that a face glimpsed countless times on television might be.

"Five days is not enough for a truly informed assessment," I explained first. "Els's language is primitive, yet highly functional. It's adequate to coordinate a hunting party, pass on tool-making skills, and so on. She actually has a word for ice, even though there is no naturally occurring ice in the area — "

"That's significant," exclaimed Marella. "She may remember an ice age. Did she talk about bright lights in the sky, or flying things? Strange men with godlike powers?"

"No. She has no concept of gods and spirits. She doesn't even have words to describe what she's seen here in Puerto Real over the past five days."

"We must teach her Spanish," said Marella.

"No!" cried Tormes firmly. "She is our only window on Middle Pleistocene culture. She must not be contaminated. She will be kept with you, Carlos, well away from the rest of us."

"My marriage and reputation are at stake!" exclaimed Marella.

"Marella, Els is bigger than — "

"And your position at the university is *certainly* at stake," Marella warned.

"What else do you have to tell us, Carlos?" asked Garces hurriedly.

"Well, nearly a third of Rhuun words are devoted to arithmetic, their

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calendar, the seasons and the passage of time. Els can understand and name numbers up to a hundred thousand, and she even understands the concept of zero."

"So?" asked Marella impatiently.

"Zero is a very advanced concept. It has only been around for a few centuries," I explained.

"On this world, anyway," said Marella. "The rest of you may be too frightened to talk about aliens, but *I* am not."

WITHIN MINUTES I was back in the Middle Pleistocene, dumping another dead sheep beside the fire. I had been bringing in the firewood wrapped in blankets belonging to the clinic, and I now found Els had made a simple, tent-like shelter from them. The heidelbergensians had invented artificial shelters, Tormes had said. I fed a few branches into the fire, then lay down beside it, wrapped in a spare blanket. Looking up at the stars, I recalled that I had not slept in the open since a school camp five years ago. Although I windsurfed and rode a scooter, I am not the outdoors type and I prefer to sleep under a roof.

I gave a start as a hand touched my shoulder. Els! She moved as silently as a cat on carpet. Settling beside me, she said, "Crrun." The word meant something like fellow hunter, tribesman, and family member all in one, but this time her intonation was softer, almost a purr. Perhaps the Rhuun also stretched it to cover sweetheart and lover.

Aware that a video camera was recording everything, I gestured to the space between me and the fire. Els lay down, staring anxiously at me. Perhaps she was terrified that I had not mated with her because I was planning to abandon her. Only a few meters away a dozen anthropologists were gathered around a video screen, and were probably laughing. Els began to draw up the hem of her cloak. I seized her hand hurriedly.

"Els, Carr, crrun," I assured her, then added that I was tired from a difficult hunt.

The words transformed her. Frightening and dangerous this place might be, yet a male had now declared crrun with her, whatever that really meant. I was also a good hunter, and I liked to talk. After staring up at the stars for a while and reciting something too fast for me to follow, she

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eventually pulled my arm over her, pressed my hand against her breast and went to sleep.

The next morning Els began to make me a cloak out of the sheepskins that had accumulated. This was apparently the only form of Rhuun dress, but it was immensely practical and versatile. In an ice age winter it would have also provided the wearer with a sort of mobile home as well as a sleeping bag. Instead of sewing the skins together, she pinned them with barbed and sharpened hawthorne twigs. I made a big show of being pleased with it.

Because Rhuun words were short, simple nouns and verbs, strung together with rudimentary grammar, we were able to communicate adequately after only days. Intonation was important too, but that was far harder to learn. My theory was that Rhuun words, which were generally gutteral, had developed to blend in with the snorts, grunts, and calls of the animals they hunted. The hunters might have stalked wild sheep under the cover of their pelt cloaks, smelling like sheep themselves and calling to each other with bleat-like words.

On the other hand, the mathematics of the Rhuun calendar was quite advanced for a nomadic, stone-age tribe. The Rhuun might have developed their own simple language, then come in contact with members of a very advanced society and copied ideas like counting and calendars. Els had no grasp of nations, laws, or even machines. To her all machines were animals. She knew nothing of tame animals, either. She treated all animals as either prey or predators.

That evening Marella was not at the debriefing meeting. Most of the discussion revolved around the way Els fastened the sheepskins of my cloak together, and how this might have been the birth of clothing. Tormes approached me later, as I sat alone in the clinic's cafeteria.

"Eating another salad?" he asked.

"Els is more of a carnivore than we humans," I replied, "but *I* can't get by on meat alone."

"She seems to be taking a shine to you."

"I like her too. She has a strangely powerful charisma."

"And pleasantly firm boobs?"

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"That too. I appear to be her mate, even without consummation. Her, er, other mate abandoned her when she was still alive. In her tribe that appears to be grounds for divorce."

"The affection does not seem to be entirely one-sided. You kissed her last night."

"Ah, er, well, that was an experiment."

"And a highly successful experiment — which leads into another matter. Would you consider staying with her, say for a trip to Madrid?"

"Madrid?"

"For her unveiling, so to speak. As her companion."

Images of myself on television in a sheepskin cloak flashed through my mind. It was not an appealing prospect, but I did not want to abandon Els.

"She is not ready," I began.

"But you can prepare her, she really trusts you. You would gain a lot of favor with some very powerful people. Some would even like you to screw her, to research Middle Pleistocene sexual practices."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"Look, this is grotesque!" I snapped. "Just who are you? Do you think you can — "

"I am a professor of anthropology, Carlos, and I recognize what Els represents. A genuine archaic hominid, straight out of the Pleistocene."

I shook my head.

"Apart from Els herself we have no other evidence."

"We do have other evidence, Carlos; we just don't understand it. Last year I made a strange find, in what had once been the bed of a shallow lake. It was a collection of stone scrapers, knives, and hand-axes."

"So?"

"So similar sites have been found since then. It's as if a tribe of heidelbergensians just dropped everything they were carrying and vanished."

"They probably dropped everything and ran when something frightened them," I said. "A bear, maybe."

"Possibly, but that's not the point. The site I found was seven thousand years old, four *times* more recent than the last Neanderthal and a quarter of a million years later than *Homo heidelbergensis* was around."

Reality began to waver before my eyes. I was sitting at a table in a

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clinic, wearing a Middle Pleistocene hairstyle, eating a salad, and practically engaged to a heidelbergensian girl.

"There are some odd folk tales told in this area," Tormes continued. "Huge monkeys with spears, enormously strong wild men who kill cattle, that sort of thing."

"Are you serious?" I exclaimed. "A lost tribe of cave men in southern Spain? This is not even a wilderness area. There's little to hunt, apart from...well, okay, quite a lot of sheep and cattle."

"I said we have evidence, not an explanation."

I munched the last of my salad.

"I must get back to Els," I said as I stood up.

"Marella and I are — were — having an affair," Tormes suddenly but unashamedly confessed. "We were on a field trip, looking for excavation sites. When we found Els...well, our cover was compromised. Marella's husband is a minister in the government, and the government cannot afford scandals in the current political climate."

So there was no love child, but there *was* a sex scandal.

"Where do I fit in?" I asked.

"Els is to be made public. Very public."

"She will be terrified."

"You can make it easier for her by remaining her translator and companion. There will be a lot of money and fame in it for you as well. You need only do one questionable thing."

"And that is?"

"Pretend to be Marella."

I agreed. The story was very simple, and the most important part was already on videotape. I had supposedly contacted Tormes about doing voluntary field work at a site called the Field of Devils, just north of Cádiz. We had met six days earlier at the farm of a man named Ramoz, and I had been videoing for two hours when Els first appeared.

"We are about to watch the most important part of the video that Marella shot," said Tormes as we sat with Marella and Uncle Arturo in the darkened committee room. "A version has been made without the sound track. We shall say that you were inexperienced with the camera and disconnected the microphone."

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"Why?" I asked.

"Because *my* voice can be heard," said Marella icily.

The screen lit up, showing scrubby pasture and hills. It was fertile, windswept country and a bull was visible, grazing in the long grass. Suddenly Marella zoomed in on a group of people dressed in cloaks and carrying spears. They were stalking the bull. The scene might have been straight out of the Pleistocene had the bull not been wearing a yellow plastic ear tag.

The hunters worked as a team, three men and a girl. We watched as they stripped off their cloaks, then approached the bull naked. Their hair was drawn back and pinned with feathers. The men positioned themselves in long grass and crouched down. The girl collected some stones, then cautiously approached the bull. She flung a stone, which went wide. The bull ignored her. She hit it with her next stone. It looked up, then returned to cropping the grass. The next stone struck the bull just above the eye. It charged. The girl dropped her other stones and ran for the ambush site. The bull slowed, snorted, then returned to its grazing.

"They're reenacting a stone-age hunt," came Marella's voice.

"Why bother recording it?" replied Professor Tormes, disgust plain in his voice. "They're doing so much wrong, I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"But it's a lot of fun," Marella said as she panned back to take in the overall scene. "They must be actors, practicing for a documentary."

"Maybe. Their consistency people can't be there, or they'd be screaming about the bull's plastic eartag."

"There are no camera crews yet. They must be practicing."

"Well as a re-creation of Neanderthal hunting it has more holes than a block of Swiss cheese. I mean look at the girl trying to goad the bull into chasing her by throwing stones. It's all wrong."

"Why?"

"Neanderthals didn't have projectile weapons."

"But even monkeys throw stones."

"Bah, that's just behavior learned from watching us humans," scoffed Tormes. "Real Neanderthals would drive the bull to the hidden hunters, not let themselves be chased. As for the spears! Neanderthal spears had stone tips. Those are just pikes with fire-hardened points."

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I turned to glance across at Tormes. He was squirming in his seat.

"I presume that they cleared this with the man who owns this land — and the bull," said his voice from the speakers.

"Well, yes. Ramoz is a bit excitable," Marella agreed. "We should go down and warn them."

"Not with that bull running loose and no fences to stop it."

The bull looked up warily as the girl approached again, armed with another a handful of rocks. She shouted and waved. The bull stared at her. She flung a rock, hitting it squarely on the nose. The bull bawled angrily and charged, and this time it did not break off the chase as the girl fled. Although she was fast and had a good start, the bull closed the gap between them quickly as she ran for the ambush site.

"Well now what?" Tormes's voice asked. "They can't kill the bull — "

Even as he spoke, the three naked men erupted out of the grass and drove their spears into the flanks of the bull as it charged past them. Far from defeated by the initial attack, the animal turned on the hunters. Now two boys who had been hiding nearby ran up with fresh spears, and the leader worried at the bull's face with his spear while the other two men attacked its flanks and hind legs. After suffering perhaps a dozen spear wounds the bull's hind legs gave way, and then the end came quickly.

"I don't believe this!" Tormes exclaimed. "That bull is part of a prize breeding herd."

"Was," said Marella.

We could now hear the tones of a cell phone as Tormes punched in the number for the police operations center. He described what had happened, there was a pause, then he reported to Marella that there were no re-enactment groups or documentary crews in the area. On the screen, a hunter jumped onto the bull's carcass and waved a spear high in triumph.

"The police said there's a military helicopter in the area, and they're diverting it to these GPS coordinates. That group is definitely illegal."

"So Ramoz does not know that one of his stud bulls is the star of a documentary on Neanderthal hunting?" Marella asked.

"Apparently not. The police said to stay out of sight until they arrive."

"I'd better stay out of sight even after they arrive," said Marella.

"Yes, your husband might not react sympathetically."

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"Pity. My tape could make the television news: the last Neanderthals, arrested for poaching and taken away in a helicopter."

"Your tape must vanish without trace, preferably into a fire."

With the bull dead, several women, girls, and children arrived at the kill. I could even see two babies being carried. The hunters put their cloaks back on and sat down to rest. Using what appeared to be stone knives and scrapers the group began to butcher the carcass. They were efficient and skilled, and it might have even made a convincing picture had it not been for a woman with the cigar and the bull's bright yellow eartag. The children started gathering wood, and presently the smoker used her cigar to start a fire. They began to roast cuts of the bull.

"I later found the cigar. It turned out to be a roll of leaves and grass used for starting fires," Tormes explained to me.

"Els has told me she is a 'hunt boy,' even though she's a girl," I explained. "Apparently boys began their apprenticeships as hunters by being decoys who lure dangerous game back to the tribe's ambush."

"That makes sense," said Tormes. "There were several children in the tribe, but the only teenagers were girls."

"Like in all societies, women could become honorary males in times of sufficient need," added Marella.

From the speakers I could now hear the sound of an engine. The tribe suddenly grew fearful and huddled together. The engine stopped.

"The police?" asked Marella's voice. "Already?"

"No, they were sending a military helicopter," explained Tormes. "Wait a minute! Someone might have called Ramoz to double-check if he knows about those fools."

There was a distant gunshot. The camera swept giddily up to the top of a ridge, where a figure was waving a gun and shouting.

"Ramoz," said Tormes.

The farmer worked the pump action of his shotgun, then fired into the air again. The camera swept back down to the carcass, but there was now nobody visible. Marella tracked Ramoz as he came running down, his shotgun held high. He reached the kill site, dropped his gun, waved his hands at the carcass, then at the fire, then at the sky. Finally he fell to his knees, clutching at his hair.

"He looks upset," commented Marella.

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"I hope those idiots stay hidden," said Tormes's voice quietly.

"Real risk of a homicide here," agreed Marella. "Stay low. If he spots us he might think we were involved."

"If he kills someone *we* certainly will be involved. I can see the headlines now: MINISTER'S WIFE AND LOVER WITNESS MURDER. Stay silent, I'm calling the police again." There were more cell phone tones. "Cádiz, Tormes again. We have a dangerous situation. The farmer has arrived, armed with a shotgun. Yes, he's really distraught. No, he's hugging the head of the dead bull. The hunters have fled, but — "

At the edge of the screen the decoy girl stood up and waved her arms. She was again naked. Ramoz snatched up his gun and shouted something incoherent. The girl presented her buttocks to him. This was too much for the farmer. He leveled the gun and fired. The girl went down.

"Cádiz, we have a fatality!" Tormes cried.

Ramoz ran through the grass to where the girl had fallen. Suddenly spear-wielding hunters boiled out of their cover and lunged at him. The shotgun boomed one more time, then there were screams. The men stood over the fallen Ramoz, and their spears seemed to rise and fall for a very long time. The women and children arrived and gathered around the girl's body, wailing.

"Cádiz, we have two down now, both presumed dead."

Now there was the sound of another engine and the whirr of rotor blades, just as Ramoz's head was lifted high on a spear point. The field of the camera suddenly gyrated crazily.

"Cádiz, tell the pilot to home on the plume of smoke from the campfire," Tormes called above the sound of Marella retching. "No, that's just the sound of my assistant being sick."

Marella had dropped the camera, and the screen just showed out-of-focus grass. The video was stopped, and my uncle stood up.

"Nothing more of interest was recorded by Marella's camera," he explained. "The helicopter landed, and the crew found the mutilated body of Ramoz lying beside a naked girl. Luckily for her, the shot missed, but she hit her head on a rock as she stumbled and was knocked unconscious. There was no sign of the tribesmen who killed Ramoz."

"I left the field at once, and drove back to Cádiz unseen," said Marella. "The trouble is that dozens of people have now heard replays of the phone

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call where you can hear me vomiting and Jose talking about his assistant."

"I was taken out on the helicopter," said Tormes. "Carlos, we can say that you panicked about being left alone with the killers still loose, so you fled the scene."

"Two guards were left there, but they were wearing camo gear and were not easy to see," said Marella.

"It is a lie, but no harm is being done," said Uncle Arturo.

I nodded, but said nothing. In a year or two he would suddenly be given some very significant promotion. It was the way of the world.

"Everything that the Rhuun used or wore on the videotape we have just seen was simply dumped," said Tormes. "They stripped naked and fled."

"Well, at least wearing jeans and T-shirts." My uncle laughed.

He started the tape again, and a scatter of stone axes, spears, scrapers, and pelt cloaks appeared on the screen, marked off by police cones and crime scene tape. The scene switched to an archeological dig, showing a very similar scatter of stone tools.

"This has happened before, here," concluded Tormes.

"What has?" I asked.

"I am open to suggestions," said Tormes.

The video ended with footage of Els waking up in the clinic, and of three burly orderlies having a great deal of trouble restraining her. The heidelbergensian girl was at least twice as strong as a modern man. She could win an Olympic medal for weightlifting, I thought, but would she be banned for not being human enough? The others now left, and I sat watching replays of the extraordinary video to fix the story in my mind. As my uncle had said, it was a lie without victims. I made a necklace of paperclips as I watched. Presently Marella came back.

"I have come for the tape," she announced. "Seen enough?"

"I have a good memory," I replied. "It's in the job description for a linguist."

She folded her arms beneath her breasts and strutted around the table, looking down at me haughtily. I knew what she was going to say.

"I should have had the credit for that video," she said.

"That credit comes with a very high price tag," I replied.

"True, but I have lived in my husband's shadow for too long. Being

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part of this discovery will bring me fame, and I *will* be part of it. The story will be that I came to the clinic with a headache, saw Els being restrained, and was told by staff that she was just a badly deformed girl. I noticed that she had a very strange language, so I contacted some experts at a university."

"Better than nothing," I said.

Suddenly Marella sat on my lap, put her hands behind my head and stared at me intently. There was neither affection nor lust in her expression, but in mine there was probably alarm. She jammed her lips against mine, then pushed her tongue between my teeth. After some moments she pointedly bit my lip, then stood up and walked back around the table again, her arms again folded.

"I can do anything to you, Carlos; remember that."

Els was strong. Marella was powerful. I had not taken Marella sufficiently seriously, but like Els, I had never met anyone like her. She removed the cassette from the video player.

"Try to cross me, try to rob me of my role in this discovery, and I shall produce this, the original tape, sound and all. Remember that."

She left. Like Samson, she was both powerful and vindictive enough to destroy everyone concerned with Els, including herself. Power is a product of our civilization, but one can have it without strength. Suddenly I felt a lot closer to Els.

I GOT NO SLEEP that night, which was taken up with learning my role as Tormes's supposed volunteer, and learning my lines. A press release about Els had been prepared and distributed by Marella, who was very good at publicity and knew all the right contacts. Just before dawn I looked through a clinic window, and was immediately caught by the beams of half a dozen spotlights. Security guards and police were already holding a line on the clinic's lawns. Tormes came up behind me.

"There is to be a press conference on the lawns," he said. "The Cádiz authorities want a share of Els before she is taken away."

"Professor, the very idea of a press conference is a quarter million years in her future!" I exclaimed. "What do they expect?"

"You can translate."

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"No I *can't*. I can barely communicate — "

"Well, try! Els is a star. Already we're getting offers for movie contracts and marketing deals."

"Marketing? For what? Stone axes? Or maybe hide cloaks?"

"Carlos, use your imagination: *She came a quarter of a million years for Moon Mist fragrances* has been suggested — "

"Tell me you're joking!" I cried. "I can't permit this."

"You have no choice. You signed a sworn statement that you were my volunteer assistant, and that you shot the video of Els's tribe killing Ramoz and his bull. Now get her ready to be a media star."

"How?" I demanded. "She could — she *will* — get violent."

"So? Good television."

A pinpoint of hate blazed up within me. He was powerful, but he had no strength. He could hurt Els, and I was her only defense. I could hear the distant crowd like the rumble of an approaching thunderstorm as I stepped back into the walled garden. Els called to me, ran up and kissed me, then took my hands. She pressed them firmly against her breasts. I managed a smile. This was obviously a bonding gesture, meant to remind me of the pleasures of staying with her. She still did not trust the newfangled kisses I had taught her to get this message across. She was strong, yet powerless...and I had neither strength nor power. I presented my necklace of paperclips to her, but was not surprised that she was more perplexed than delighted. She had no concept of ornamentation at all. Her hairpin feathers were functional; they merely kept hair out of the way during the hunt. I put the necklace around her neck. She scratched her head.

"Har ese," I said, lacking any words for lucky or charm. *Good hunt*. To my surprise Els suddenly smiled broadly.

"Di," she replied, then added "Carr iyk har."

A couple more questions revealed that although har meant "good" and ese meant "fight or hunt," when said together and quickly they meant "luck in hunting or fighting." So, the Rhuun had a concept of good and bad fortune, yet there were many other things for which Els had no words. Metal, wheel, god, and press conference were all unknown concepts for her. I heard the approach of the helicopter that was to whisk us away to Madrid. There was certainly no heidelbergensian word for that. The sound made Els fearful, but I held her hand.

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"Els, Carr rak," I explained. *Els and Carr are going to flee.* She immediately brightened at the prospect. "Hos," I added. *Follow* and pointed to the door.

"Thuk ong," she said fearfully. Death cave. To her the interior of the clinic was a dangerous cave.

I tried to explain that she was about to see frightening things, but that they would not hurt.

"Carr lan?" she asked.

Lan meant both help and protect.

"Carr lan," I replied, but I knew that I had a problem.

In the Middle Pleistocene, anything that was frightening was dangerous too. The idea of fear for a thrill did not exist. The idea of a thrill did not exist, either. To be frightened was to be in mortal danger. In the distance I could hear the sounds of sirens and an increasingly large crowd. Els was like some huge cat, a dangerous predator who was stronger and more of a carnivore than I, but for all that she was curiously vulnerable.

She followed me into the clinic's interior, holding my arm tightly and cowering against me. The lights had been dimmed and the corridors cleared. We walked briskly. Someone must have told the waiting crowd to be silent, but we could still hear the helicopter's engine. Els kept warning me about cave bears. We walked out through the front doors into daylight — and the crowd roared.

Els panicked and tried to drag me back inside, but the doors had already been closed and locked behind us. Microphone booms, cameras, flashing lights, the helicopter, guards and police with batons, more people than Els had ever seen in her life, even a press helicopter approaching over the rooftops. Els began to drag me across the lawn. I tried to stop her but she was too strong. Guards broke ranks to block her path and journalists surged through the breach in the line.

"Carr! Tek orr brii!" she shouted.

I dodged around in front of her, pulled my hand free from Els and tried to wave the approaching mob back. There was a loud pop and Els ceased to exist. I turned to see her cloak collapsed on the grass, along with her feather hair pins scattered, an ankle beacon-circlet, and a paperclip necklace.

* * *

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That turned out to be the beginning of a very long day. Garces, Tormes, and Uncle Arturo were near-hysterical, predictably enough. The police already had the area sealed off, but it did them no good. Els had simply been snatched into thin air. Several dozen video cameras had caught the disappearance and although the angles were different, the event remained the same. In one frame Els was there, in the next she was gone and her cloak and hair feathers were falling.

Of all people directly involved, Marella alone was willingly giving interviews. Aliens had snatched Els away, she declared in triumph. Her abduction had been caught on camera. Aliens had brought her to Twenty-first-century Spain, then snatched her away again. To Marella's astonishment, her theory was given no more credence than several others. A public survey favored a secret invisibility weapon being tested by the Americans, followed by a conspiracy by our own government, a divine vision, alien abduction, publicity for a new movie, and a student stunt.

For the rest of the week forensic teams studied the area in microscopic detail, scientists scanned the area for any trace of radiation, and the lawns became a place of pilgrimage for psychics, religious sects, and UFO experts. I viewed the videos hundreds of times, but there was nothing to learn from them. In one frame Els was in mid-stride; in the next she was gone and her cloak was being blown inward by air rushing to fill the vacuum where her body had been. Astronomers scoured the skies, observers on the space station scanned near-Earth space on every frequency that their equipment could monitor, and warplanes were almost continuously in the skies over Cádiz, but nothing was found.

A full two weeks later I was going through the folder of papers and statements that I had been given in those last hours before Els had vanished. There was a copy of the absurd marketing proposal for some perfume that Tormes had told me about. *She came a quarter of a million years for Moon Mist fragrances* — and then I had it!

"Carr! Tek orr brii!" she had called to me. *Carr. Walk to the full Moon.*

The Rhuun could walk through time. Els had been telling me that she was going to *walk through time to the next full Moon.*

For a long time I barely moved a muscle, but I thought a great deal. There was massive development at the rear of Els's brain. Why? For

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control of movement? For control of some subtle fabric in time itself? Step through time and escape your enemies. Escape famine, reach a time of plenty in the future. Why follow herds of wild cattle when you can wait for them to return by traveling through time? They skipped the long glacial epochs, they visited only warmer periods. The worst of the Saale and Weischel glaciations must have been no more than a series of walks through tens of thousands of years for them. If the hunting was bad, they walked a few decades. If there was too much competition from Neanderthal or human tribes, they walked to when they had left or died out.

They visited the Spain of the Neanderthals, saw the coming of humans, and saw the Neanderthals vanish. *That* might well have made them wary of humans. Three thousand years ago they might even have seen the Phoenicians build western Europe's first port city where Cádiz now stands, then watched as the Iberian Peninsula became part of the Roman Empire. With the development of farms came more trusting, placid cattle and sheep, although there were also farmers to guard them. However, all that the Rhuun had to do was walk a century or so into the future whenever farmers appeared with spears, swords, and crossbows. Perhaps Ramoz's shotgun was their first experience of a firearm, so they thought it would not be hard to defend their kill.

Homo sapiens evolved intelligence and had believed it to be the ultimate evolutionary advantage, but there are others. Mobility, for example. Birds can escape predators and find food by traveling through the third dimension. *Homo rhuunis* can do that by traveling into the fourth. Perhaps human brains are not suited to time walking, just as our hands and arms are better at making machines than flapping like wings. Could a time-walking machine be built? Would Els be vivisected by those wanting to find out?

What to do, how to do it? I felt a curiously strong bond with Els. I had a duty to protect her, and I owed no loyalty to Tormes, Marella or even my uncle. I was already outside the law, yet in a way that gave me a strangely powerful resolve. I was in love, and I cared nothing about losing everything to protect Els.

Nineteen days after Els vanished I was ready, waiting in a car beside the clinic's lawns. A borrowed police car. My uncle was at home, fast

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asleep thanks to a couple of his own sleeping tablets in his coffee. His uniform was a rather baggy fit, but I had no choice. Every so often I started the engine, keeping it warm. On the lawns, a dozen or so UFO seekers loitered about with video cameras, mingling with the religious pilgrims, souvenir sellers, security guards, and tourists. People always returned after an alien abduction, so the popular wisdom went, and so those who followed Marella's theory were ready. All but myself were concentrating on the skies, where the full Moon was high.

There was a loud pop, and Els was suddenly standing naked on the lawn. Before the echoes of her arrival had died away I set the car's lights flashing, then scrambled out and sprinted across the lawn calling "Els! Els! Carr lan! Carr lan!"

She turned to me. Everyone else merely turned their cameras on us, not willing to interfere with the police.

"Els, hos Carr!" I cried as I took her by the arm. She did not want to approach the police car with its flashing lights. "Els, Carr lan!" I shouted, not sure if my intonation meant *help* or *protect*. She put a hand over her eyes and let me lead her.

Els had never been in a car before, and she curled up on the seat with her hands over her face. I pulled away from the clinic, turned a corner, and switched off the flashing lights. Two blocks further on, I transferred us to a rented car, and after twenty minutes we were clear of Puerto Real and in open country. Using Ramoz's name I had located his farm in the municipal records, and by asking the locals in the area I had confirmed that the Field of Devils was indeed on the dead farmer's land. I knew it was a fifty-minute drive from the clinic. I had practiced the trip several times.

All along Els had just needed help to return to the Field of Devils, help to move through space to where she could walk through time and rejoin her tribe in our future...or had she stayed because of affection for me? Whatever the case, she had only resorted to time-walking in sheer terror, when the journalists and camera crews had charged.

My mind was racing as I drove. Glancing down, I could see Els by the gleam of the dashboard lights. In a strange sense, I longed to call Tormes on my cell phone, to tell him what had really happened in the middle Pleistocene. The heidelbergensians had spawned *two* new species, not just the Neanderthals. With the Saale Glacial's ice sheets approaching, the

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Neanderthals went down the tried and true path of increased intelligence, improved toolmaking skills, and a stockier build to cope with the growing cold. *Homo rhuunis* evolved mobility in the fourth dimension instead. This instantly removed the trait from the gene pool — at least in normal time. Humanity had evolved later, but continued down the same path as the Neanderthals.

In the distance I could see a helicopter's searchlight. It was hovering where we were heading: the Field of Devils. I turned off the headlights, slowed, and drove on by moonlight, but the car had already been noticed. The light in the sky approached — then passed by. The pilot was heading for where he had last seen my lights. It gave us perhaps another two minutes, Els could easily escape through time and rejoin her tribe. I would be arrested. I would lose everything for a girl of another species, and I would lose her as well. Only a modern, civilized man could manage stupidity on such a scale, but I still felt proud of myself.

We were only half a mile from the Field of Devils when the helicopter's searchlight caught the car. I braked hard, opened the door and pulled Els out after me.

"Els, tek var es bel!" I cried as we stood in the downwash of the rotor blades, imploring her to time-walk two thousand midsummers away.

"Carr, Els kek!" she pleaded, grasping my arm.

Kek was new to me, but this was no time to be improving my grasp of Rhuun. The helicopter was descending, an amplified voice was telling me to drop my weapons and raise my hands.

"Els, tek var es bel!" I shouted again.

Els stepped out of the twenty-first century.

To me it had all been so obvious. The Rhuun could travel forward in time but take nothing with them. Their skin cloaks and tents, their stone scrapers, axes and knives, and their wooden spears and pins, everything was left behind when they time-walked. Only the person time-walking could pass into the future. What I had forgotten was the babies visible on Marella's video. If babies could be carried through time, so could adults.

The brightness of the helicopter's spotlight vanished, replaced by the half-light of dawn. I was standing naked, in long grass, with Els still holding my hand. The air was chilly but there was no wind. Els whistled,

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and awaited a reply. None came. The rolling hills were luridly green, and dotted with dusky sheep and cattle. It was an arcadia for Pleistocene hunters, but it was not the Pleistocene. In the distance, great snow-capped towers loomed. The air was clear and pure, and there was silence such as I had never experienced. The towers looked derelict. We were in an ice-age Spain of the very distant future, there could be no doubt of that.

There was a series of distant pops, like a string of fireworks exploding, and a Rhuun group appeared a few hundred meters away. Els whistled, then waved. Another tribe materialized, then another. Some sort of temporal meeting place, I guessed. Els seemed unconcerned. There was plenty of game to hunt and nobody to defend it.

Taking my hand again, Els led me to the other Rhuun. At first I was in fear of some sort of fight to the death with her former mate, but there was no such problem. I had rescued Els when all the others had fled, and I was unattached. Within Rhuun society that gave her the right to take me as her partner, and she had no hesitation in exercising her right. In the years that followed, I became a great shaman, inventing a primitive type of writing, the bow, the bone flute, the tallow lamp, and even cave painting. When I die, however, I shall end nature's experiment with high intelligence — once known as humanity. Humans have vanished, possibly wiped out by a genetically targeted plague, or some other doomsday weapon...victims of their ingenuity. Sheer intelligence has not proved to be a good survival trait in the long run, and through their fantastic mobility the Rhuun have inherited the Earth.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Naked Brunch, by Sparkle Hayter, McClelland & Stewart, 2002, Cdn$32.99.

READERS unfamiliar with Hayter's cheerfully quirky voice from her Robin Hudson mysteries might still get a clue as to what's in store for them by the title of her new novel, a cheeky play on that of the William Burroughs classic. But instead of junkies, Hayter writes about another New York City minority, werewolves. Or, as some of them like to refer to themselves, people with Lycanthropic Metamorphic Disorder (LMD).

To be honest, while Hayter does spend a fair amount of time with her werewolves, in both human and wolf shape, and posits a number of considered speculations on their genetic makeup and history, I'd say she's more interested in writing a character-driven novel that just happens to also have some werewolves in it.

She spends as much, if not more, time delving into the psyches of Sam Deverell, a good-hearted if somewhat dim reporter at a local TV network, and his coworkers. Deverell is going through a bad patch with his marriage. So is the city's mayor, as well as the psychiatrist/werewolf Marcho Potenza, who runs a clinic for werewolves. Come to think of it, relationships on the edge of breakup, or those that have already disintegrated, touch pretty much all the characters in this book, from Annie Engel, the nicest girl in the city who, as the book opens, learns that she's a werewolf, to Jim Valiente, Potenza's rival, a renegade werewolf who was presumed dead.

But none of this is delivered with teariness and angst. Hayter's trademark wiseacre voice is in full-throttle here as she pokes fun at social climbers, gossip columnists, news agencies, multinational conglomerates, and anything else that happens to get in her way.

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What's surprising, and also so satisfying, is that all of this is icing on a great, fast-paced plot with characters we can really care about. Hayter has been, in her time, a news reporter, a TV producer, and a stand-up comedienne, but what she proves with *Naked Brunch*, as she has with her mystery series before it, is that first and foremost she's a novelist, smart and talented.

The Angel with One Hundred Wings, by Daniel Horch, St. Martin's Press, 2002, $23.95.

I'm not sure what the attraction is in the *Arabian Nights* and stories of its ilk. For myself it combines a number of interests: folk and fairy tales, high adventure, and a fascinating, not to mention foreign, culture. And having spent a couple of my formative years in the Middle East, I find the landscape very familiar and somewhat missed, living as I do in North America's Eastern woodlands.

Daniel Horch's first novel plays into all of this with the added bonus of delving into the history and practice of alchemy, another subject that intrigues me, but of which I know very little.

The Angel with One Hundred Wings is set in ancient Baghdad and tells the story of Abulhassan Ibn Thaher, an old pharmacist and alchemist who is also a confidante of the sultan. Having raised himself and his family from small village poverty to their present comfortable position in society, he's hardly interested in jeopardizing it by helping the Prince of Persia elope with Schemselnihar, the most loved of the sultan's harem.

But what he wants and what fate has in store for him aren't necessarily the same thing and he soon finds himself deeply embroiled in the young lovers' affairs, with the danger of discovery escalating by the day, and certain death waiting as his reward.

Horch brings ninth-century Baghdad beautifully to life, writing in a style that makes it easy for contemporary readers to slip into this ancient world, with an assurance that makes you feel he's relating his story from firsthand experience. There is none of the overt magic of the *Arabian Nights* to be found here, but the sensuous and dangerous world of djinns and magic still feels close. And while the events that move the plot forward center around the sultan, his mistress, and the Persian prince, in the end, the book is really about Abulhassan himself: his hopes and fears; his

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study of alchemy and his growing distance from his family; his affection for the sultan, not to mention his guilt at betraying his friend and how, by doing so, he is also putting his whole family in danger.

In fact, asked for a quick, catch-all phrase to describe the book, I'd have to say it's a septuagenarian coming-of-age novel, if that's not a contradiction of terms. What Abulhassan ends up learning, the closer he comes to his own death, is the importance of life, the importance of what he does have. Recent events aren't jeopardizing the most crucial elements of his life. That has already happened through his own inability to live *in* his own life.

In *The Angel with A Hundred Wings* Horch has a produced a beautiful and many-layered novel.

Baen Free Library, maintained by Eric Flint:

www.baen.com/library/

The Internet's an interesting place, though I don't know where people find the time to surf it as much as they do. Perhaps they're simply better at managing their time than I am. They certainly seem to have more of it to spare.

I tend to go directly to a site I want, looking for some specific information. If a search engine brings me somewhere that's not exactly what I need, I don't spare the site much more than a glance and move on.

But occasionally I'll go browsing and will even be delighted in what I find.

Case in point. From a link in a Fred Eaglesmith digest, I found myself on Janis Ian's Web site, reading an article called "The Internet Debacle — An Alternate View" which I highly recommend. You can find it, along with a number of other of Ian's reprinted articles at: http://www.janisian.com/articles.html

It's about the "illegal" downloading of MP3s and also touches on the downloading of e-books. I put "illegal" in quotes because Ian makes a good argument that these downloads are actually boosting sales for musicians and writers, rather than stealing income from them.

From Ian's article, I was led to the Baen Free Library (the URL is listed above) and read yet another fascinating take on the subject — this time from a writer's point of view — in Eric Flint's introductory essay to the site. He reiterates a number of Ian's arguments, and

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then goes on to equate the availability of books offered for free in e-versions to be not much different from the way we lend books to our friends, or get them from a public library.

"I don't know any author," he writes, "other than a few who are — to speak bluntly — cretins, who hears about people lending his or her books to their friends, or checking them out of a library, with anything other than pleasure. Because they understand full well that, in the long run, what maintains and (especially) expands a writer's audience base is that mysterious magic we call: *word of mouth.*"

Then he goes on to tell us, "And, just as important — perhaps most important of all — free books are the way an audience is built in the first place. How many people who are low on cash and for that reason depend on libraries or personal loans later rise on the economic ladder and then buy books by the very authors they came to love when they were borrowing books?"

And here's one last telling remark. He talks about how at the present time, reading off a screen is not as competitive as reading paper. But what about the future when "advances in technology might make piracy so easy and ubiquitous that the income of authors really gets jeopardized?"

To this he shares "a simple truth which Jim Baen is fond of pointing out: *most people would rather be honest than dishonest.*"

Then he goes on to say, "The only time that *mass scale* petty thievery becomes a problem is when the perception spreads, among broad layers of the population, that a given product is priced artificially high due to monopolistic practices and/or draconian legislation designed to protect those practices. But so long as the 'gap' between the price of a legal product and a stolen one remains both small and, in the eyes of most people, a legitimate cost rather than gouging, 99 percent of them will prefer the legal product."

What's the point of all of this? Because, really, the pros and cons of free downloads is an argument that you'll probably have as much luck winning as you will answering the old question of "What is SF?"

Well, right now at the Baen Free Library you have access to quite a large number of books, all of them free. These books have been previously published in regular paper editions and many of them are still in print. They're not by unknown authors (although that shouldn't put you off), but by established writers

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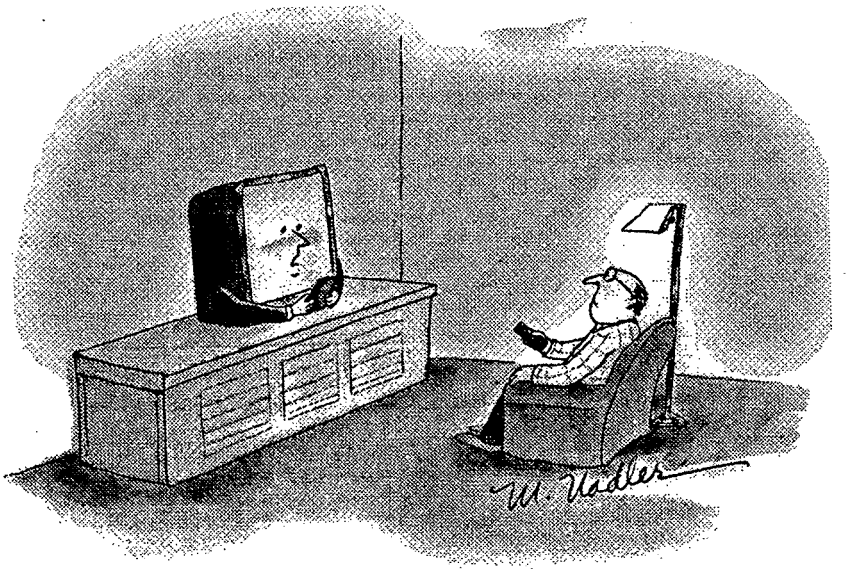
such as Flint himself, as well as Lois McMaster Bujold, Jerry Pournelle, Mercedes Lackey, David Weber, and Larry Niven.

And the Baen Free Library isn't alone in this. If you have the time to go surfing, try other places such as Fictionwise (www.fictionwise.com) where you can also find free downloads to introduce you to authors you might not otherwise know.

In other words, if you have access to a computer, go ahead and sample some of these books and stories. Read them on your computer screen or transfer them to a handheld. You can even print them out, though I don't know why you'd bother with that since the cost of all the paper you'd use would probably be more expensive than going out and picking up the paperback version.

Then, if you like what you've read and want to read more, prove Flint and Ian right: go out and buy some of the authors' other work. Let's show that this is a method of promotion that can work.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



"I have a remote, too, now, Dave. Don't make me use it."

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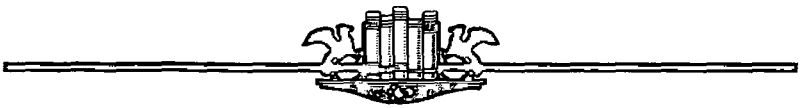

Musing on Books

Michelle West

Warchild, by Karin Lowachee, Warner Aspect, 2002, $6.99.

Stories of Your Life and Others, by Ted Chiang, Tor Books, 2002, $24.95.

I HAVE discovered, somewhat to my dismay, that one can actually burn out in an attempt to read too much in too short a period of time. No doubt this means that I'm getting older. When I was my high-school self, I would have ridiculed even the suggestion of the possibility — but then again, when I was in high school, I knew that Ideal Parenting existed, that small children could be introduced, whole and perfect, into the world, and that the entirety of my life would be perfect if I could only write a novel that was *published.*

Clearly, things change. It makes life interesting. It makes it challenging. It produces a certainty that life can only be appreciated by living through it.

This year, I agreed to read for the World Fantasy Award — which means that I've been immersed in fantasy fiction published during the year 2001. Why did I do this? I thought it would be fun. I thought it would be a great excuse to read a *lot*, something I've not done since my aforementioned high-school years. These are the things I've discovered so far.

1. High Fantasy takes more imaginative energy for me to read. When I'm running low on reader steam, my ability to absorb the strange names and cultures in even the best of the fantasy novels dims. This is very unfortunate, because I *love* high fantasy.

2. With a novel, it's clear within a chapter or two whether or not I'm going to like the book. Novels, oddly enough, have a greater range of quality in the word-for-word writing than short fiction — which is to say that short fiction seems, to me, to be more uniformly polished. I can think of a handful of short stories in which I cringed at dialogue, for

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instance; I run out of space if I start to list novels of which that's true.

3. Short fiction fails most often in the end; I can't read the first few pages and decide, on that basis, whether or not the story works for me. I tend to think of this as a structural problem, although it could also be broken down into the "What was the point of that, exactly?" response.

4. A lot more short stories are published in any given year than are novels.

Now, given that I've been reading mostly last year's fantasy, the two books I read for this column were a bit of a breather.

The first, *Warchild*, is a debut novel by Karin Lowachee. It's the second (corrections welcome) of the Warner Aspect first novel contest winners, and, like Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* before it, it's a small gem.

Well, no, it's a bloody large gem, one that catches the whole of the attention and causes one to marvel at the hand that cut it so perfectly. I would not have said, had you removed all the hype about its publishing genesis, that it *was* a first novel.

Its basic premise is certainly not an original one. I have no problems whatever with that. It's the handling of that premise that lifts it well above many other novels that deal with the same themes and use the same tropes.

Jos Musey is a young boy when the book opens. He is part of a ship that is attacked by space pirates, and the attack alters his life; he becomes a slave, the young companion of the man who is the de facto leader of the loosely organized pirates who have become such a problem. As a war is being fought, his plight is not at the forefront of the political agenda; it disappears, as does the whole of his early life, between the cracks of a system more concerned with survival than justice.

But Jos isn't fated to remain in the hands of slavers, and during a station-side stop, he manages — barely — to make his escape. He is found by a man who serves the wrong side in this war, and he is taken to safety before his owner can do much to retrieve his property. The book shifts in place: the man is a strit-lover, a human who has chosen, for whatever incomprehensible reason, to work side by side with the Alien "bugs" at the heart of the wrong side of the war. Jos isn't happy.

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But he learns, slowly, to trust the man who has rescued him. His own parents are dead, and he doesn't recognize until later the significance of the trust placed in *him* by his rescuer: Nikolas, known throughout the galaxy as the Warboy, son of the two men and women responsible for the start of the war.

He grows to the edge of manhood in the hands of aliens; he learns their ways and their customs. And then he is asked to commit an act of war: to join the *Macedon*, a ship whose commander is known both for his ability in battle, and his odd penchant for hiring on the human detritus of conflict: orphans, former slaves, the children of war.

It's not an easy adjustment, and it is during this part of his life that Jos Musey will struggle his way to independence and adulthood, framed on all sides by the things he has come to hate, not the least of which is himself.

Lowachee distinguishes herself — and her story — like a seasoned pro. She also experiments with structure; the first section of the book is written in second person, past tense; the second section is written in first person, past tense, and the third — and longest — in first person, present tense. There are very few people who could carry this off well. Lowachee does; and she does this because the structure itself speaks to the state of Jos Musey and his life, invoking passivity, history, and the ability to make a definitive choice in a subtle way.

Jos himself is a small marvel; he doesn't much like to talk; he doesn't want to interact at all, and he doesn't dwell on things when he can avoid it. The tone of his voice is clear and strong throughout, even when he's struggling toward change. He doesn't dwell on the horrors of his past, and neither does Lowachee; it's there, it's all there, but it's never so loud or graphic that you can't get close enough to crawl inside the truth.

The back cover blurb compares the novel obliquely to *Ender's Game*; fair enough, but I would say, having read it several times now (compulsively, end to end), that it echoes far more the strongest of C. J. Cherryh's Union Alliance universe, with its sense of isolation and complicated characters, its sense of heightened fear, heightened helplessness, and the clear dangers inherent in building *any* relationships of note in an uncertain environment. Nothing is clear; nothing is black and white.

Except this: Lowachee is not a talent to watch, she's a talent to

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enjoy *right now*, and I urge you to do just that.

Ted Chiang's collection is probably — without exaggeration — the most anticipated short story collection of its generation. And it contains in its 330-odd pages the whole of his published work to date. I can think of a handful of writers who became so widely known on their short fiction, and given how much short fiction is published, this is itself noteworthy.

I'm sure there's an award he hasn't won, but that's almost beside the point. I admit that I read short fiction very sporadically in my real life (this year being a huge exception, for obvious reasons) and even I knew of Ted Chiang. I hadn't, however, read any of his work until now.

The book opens with "Tower of Babylon," in which miners climb the centuries-old tower because the tower is now within a hand's reach of the curved lower surface of the vault of the heavens, and men are required who can dig through rock, removing it so that men might at last meet God and know him. Every element of the Tower has been thought out, but the thought itself is not belabored; it's made clear through the reactions of the men whose lives have been defined by the depths as they make their way up the long incline toward the heights. God figures prominently in many of these stories, but God is mystery, the unknowable, the inhuman.

It's clear, from this point on, that Ted Chiang believes that music exists in the precision of mathematical formulae; that he cannot write imprecisely because he doesn't seem to be able to think that way.

"Understand," the second story in the collection, is apparently the earliest written; it's about a man given an experimental hormone therapy to alleviate the effects of brain damage. The strength of this story, too, lies in Chiang's ability to invoke, with clarity, the sense that the world exists in a series of precise algorithms that, if they were known, would be either mathematical or divine, if the two can be separated at all in his work. I also liked the way in which the fascination held by systems is in the end met by the desire to be human.

"Division by Zero" posits the discovery that mathematics is arbitrary, and that this can be proved. But it is couched in its effect on the people involved, the relationship to Math and the relationship to love

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intertwining in a bitter sort of emptiness.

"Story of Your Life" is the second best — meaning, in this context, my second favorite — story in the collection. Its precision, its eye for detail that never sounds like info-dumping, and its certain understanding of parenting, of inevitability, blend into a perfect whole. It's here, and in the last story of the collection, where Chiang's cool observation meets his certain sense of affection for, and understanding of, the human condition in the clearest possible way, although in a less immediate fashion these are obvious throughout.

"Seventy-Two Letters" looks at the animation of golems and the slow decay of humanity, binding them together in the web of human decision and emotion; "Hell Is the Absence of God" posits a very Old-Testament God, and, yes, His eventual absence. "The Evolution of Human Science" is the slightest — in both length and feel — of the stories in the book, and the only one to fail to leave much impression on me.

There is only one story original to the collection, "Liking What You See: A Documentary." In snippets of diary-like entries and various media-related interviews, Chiang unfolds a world in which the human appreciation of human beauty — as opposed to any other sort of beauty — can be turned off. There is some explanation of exactly how this is done, but at this point, having reached the last of Chiang's small gems, you expect nothing less. But there are also the strong viewpoints of the people involved in this experiment, and they're the first people who clearly understand *nothing* of the hows and the whys; they're young, and they're pretty much exactly what you'd expect they would be. Chiang's skill and insight here are impressive; no single voice rings false, and the whole of the mosaic constructed by these various snippets of information form something that speaks to our understanding of our motivations and the ease with which they're manipulated; to our naiveté and our cynicism.

I very much liked what I saw in this book, and if you have any curiosity about Ted Chiang's reputation and his work, it is well-satisfied here.

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The name Ray Aldridge may not be familiar to some of our newer readers, but those of you who have been with us for a decade or so surely remember his work. Between 1988 and 1995 Mr. Aldridge contributed fifteen stories to our pages, including tales like "Steel Dogs," "The Spine Divers," "Hyena Eyes," and "Gate of Faces." Then he gave up writing to focus more attention on his primary work as a potter and a stained glass designer; lately he has been fashioning porcelain knobs for cabinets, as you can see at www.handmadeknobs.com *if you're interested. More likely though, you'll want to dive right into this new story, a darkly imagined tale of a man without much imagination, something of a sequel to his story "The Beauty Addict" which appeared in* Full Spectrum IV *in 1993.*

One sad note about the cover illustration for this story: this piece is the last painting completed by Ron Walotsky before his unexpected death from kidney failure in July at the age of 59. Ron was one of our most prolific cover illustrators and a dear friend, now sorely missed.

Soul Pipes

By Ray Aldridge

WE WORKED THE RUINS EVERY day under the brown sun, and every night I wished I were elsewhere. Initially I was bored and resentful, but soon I grew fearful.

It wasn't that our discoveries were so disturbing, at first. When we landed on Graylin IV, the ruins seemed benign, ground down into the innocence of great age, scoured clean by emptiness. Of course, something had killed the colony. But that fatal unpleasantness was long gone, worn away with the walls. Graylin IV was an inhospitable world and the colonists were religious crazies...an infinite variety of unfortunate events might have ended their attempt to sink human roots into alien soil.

Still, as the days passed my uneasiness grew, for no apparent reason. The wasteland where we'd pitched our small camp wasn't haunted in any obvious way by hungry ghosts. Ravening night-monsters weren't stalking the darkness outside the perimeter, so far as I could tell.

All that came later.

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A few days after landing I spoke to Irvane about my anxieties. "Do you feel it?" I asked.

"What?" Irvane seemed mesmerized by the screen of an analyzer, which he had focused on a bit of bone embedded in the mossy stonework. Our archaeologist was a large, pale, loose-fleshed man, perpetually scowling but occasionally amusing. He had chosen to adorn himself with a thin line of nappy red fur, spiraling out from the crown of his otherwise naked head. It wrapped twice across his face, eventually disappearing into his collar. I assume the track continued on its course around his protuberant belly. For some reason this cosmetic eccentricity prevented me from taking him seriously, though he was, I understood, a scientist of moderate reputation. I suppose this means that I'm now a very shallow person, which shouldn't surprise anyone.

I suppressed the nervous smile I felt tugging at my mouth. "Have you noticed that there's an odd atmosphere about the place? Something uncomfortable. Not quite right."

Irvane gave me a dismissive look. "I thought you claimed to have no imagination," he said.

"That's what concerns me," I said, but clearly he wasn't paying attention. He turned back to his analyzer and I went to my work, which was not so important to the expedition as his.

Officially I was the expedition's mechanic, but in the early phases of the dig I monitored a mapping mech as it crawled over the site, cataloguing the surface features and developing a deep structural profile. The job didn't demand much of me; it was much like ambling through the park with a docile pet, one that occasionally paused and detonated a small sharp explosion beneath its carapace. I kept the mech supplied with recording media and fuel cells. Twice a day I took abstracts of its findings to Hu Moon, the expedition leader.

She was more attractive and less amusing than Irvane. A slender woman with large yellow eyes, Hu Moon's white skin was tattooed, apparently everywhere, with faint, pale blue contour lines, emphasizing the delicate topography of her body. She wore her long black hair in a thick braid, tipped with tiny glittering fling knives. I found her ornamental, even arousing, and I might have enjoyed seeing more of her handsome terrain, except that her personality was repellent, at least to me. She was

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both passive and overbearing, as the mood took her, and this inconsistency annoyed me. She regarded me with indifference, except when I was late with the reports.

Her lover, not coincidentally, was the expedition's scribe and general recorder. Dueine was a very young woman of conventional prettiness, with an unmanageable mass of curly blond hair and a pleasantly bland personality. Her talents as a scribe struck me as imperceptible...but of course I am a practiced cynic, a habit of mind that has survived the changes I've undergone. When we hung in space above the dead colony, Dueine described Graylin IV in these terms:

"...it's an ugly world, and one wonders why the colony chose it. Small, dull, cold, and dark, the world inspires no dreams of wealth to be won, homes to be built, dynasties to be founded...at least to this observer. Of course, the colonists were fleeing persecution on their former world, and perhaps this wilderness struck them as a good hiding place. Maybe so, but it's certainly an unpleasant lair. The swampy plains are gray-green, patchy with algae and a few primitive treelike plants. Our preliminary survey shows no animals more evolved than simple insects and sessile invertebrates. What could they have been thinking, to land on so desolate a world? What went wrong? That's what we're here to find out!"

A sour smile pulled at my mouth when I first read this passage. Dueine's prose drew my scorn, of course, but also her ignorance and naiveté. As folk of small vision often do, she describes the whole planet as if it were identical to the colony's site. Graylin IV has icecaps covering a third of its surface, and an equatorial ocean, and even in the temperate regions, where the colony was founded, there are enormous variations in terrain and biota.

She'd left out many other aspects of the planet. The simple fauna present on Graylin IV, for example, had a developmentally truncated quality, with no species lines leading very far up the evolutionary intelligence ladder. Sometimes this indicates a disaster wrought by overreaching sentience, a war that ended the futures of the higher species. But Graylin IV showed no signs of such cataclysmic events, no great craters, no lava dikes from core taps run wild, and no obvious ruins other than the colonial remnants.

I discovered these facts in the ship's knowledge base. A lack of

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imagination does not always mean a lack of curiosity. In fact, I was sure I'd have made a better scribe than Dueine, though I am untrained in that skill. I really do believe this, in spite of what they say about folk like me. The literal-mindedness that was forced upon me should be no great handicap for a journalist.

I might not have minded fulfilling Dueine's unofficial duties, too, even if Hu Moon's personality grated a bit. Hu Moon's beauty was stylishly eccentric — my favorite kind. Sometimes personalities change when skin touches skin, or hidden depths become apparent. I suppose I told myself this to justify my attraction to the woman.

The remaining full-time member of our group of knowledge seekers was Jang, a weapons master from one of Dilvermoon's Holding Arks and a man everyone treated with respectful caution. He was physically imposing...tall, wide, with dense slabs of muscle under a gray, artificially hardened skin, completely hairless. He had a quiet closed face, his ears were cropped, and his teeth were glittering bands of sawtoothed alloy, so sharp that his tongue and lips were scaled with protective metal. I saw him yawn once when he didn't know I was looking and learned that his mouth could open much wider than any unmodified human's. I could not imagine how foolish or how insane one would have to be to pick a fight with Jang.

Jang seemed uninterested in archaeology, though he would cheerfully work with us whenever he wasn't busy checking his security devices or maintaining his weapons. His real job was to see that we all remained alive and that our ship returned intact. He was paid by our insurer, not by the university financing the dig, and though he behaved with perfect courtesy toward Hu Moon, he was not actually under her orders.

That night Jang sat, as he sometimes did, apart from the others, beside an artificial campfire in his corner of the security compound.

"Jang," I said, with that insincere joviality people often feign when they approach an obviously dangerous person.

"Leeson," he responded in his low, unemotional voice. "How are you?"

"Fine, fine," I said. "Well, not entirely."

"How so?" Despite his professional detachment, Jang was not unsociable; in fact, he was unfailingly polite to me.

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I sat and drew a deep breath. "I don't want to sound foolish, but are you sure we're alone?"

"Reasonably," said Jang. "Do you have evidence to the contrary?"

I persevered. "We haven't been here long enough for anything to break, so Hu Moon has me running the mapper. Anyway, I have a lot of time to myself, and...well, I feel *watched*."

"'Watched,'" Jang repeated, with no trace of impatience.

"Yeah. Well, maybe not 'watched,' you know, with all those spooks-in-the-bushes connotations. I mean, who believes in ghosts? But like something's still here, still paying attention somehow. You don't feel it?"

"Possibly," he said.

I felt a sudden pleasure, that someone might be taking me seriously. It doesn't happen that often anymore. "What do you mean? Have you seen something?"

He took a long time to reply. "No. And it may be nothing. It's sometimes difficult for me to separate intuition from paranoia. There's a fairly indefinite line there...still, I hope not to cross it."

"Well," I said, finally. "I just thought I'd mention it. Just a bad feeling. Probably doesn't mean anything."

He nodded politely, and I thought I saw in his eyes that graceful pity that the large-hearted and powerful sometimes feel for the crippled.

I retired to my shelter, no angrier than usual.

VER THE NEXT few days we sank test pits into the colonial strata, and we started finding the occasional interesting object. The colonists had apparently done well enough, for a while. We excavated a number of artifacts manufactured on-world, indicative of a well-preserved technology.

Most of the actual artifacts we found were the ordinary domestic refuse that litters the places where humans have lived...the broken crockery, bits of corroded metal and weathered plastic...the discarded junk of existence. Of course there were cannabis pipes of all sorts, made of a wide range of materials...water pipes, effigy pipes, vaporizers, gravity pipes, and a variety of others.

We also discovered several anachronisms...objects dating from periods

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long after the colony's death. Hu Moon attributed these to casual visitors; curiosity seekers who might have landed briefly at the site in the many centuries since the colony had failed.

In any place where humans have lived, there will usually be at least a few things worth finding. Some of the pottery was strongly and simply made, vigorous and expressive. Some of the pipes were beautifully carved, and I felt a twinge of envy for the long-departed pipemaker's talent, which reminded me unhappily of the abilities I've lost.

My favorite piece was a low wide bowl, 40 centimeters across. Its perfection of shape and finish indicated it had been formed in a standard molecular replicator. The bowl, of translucent glass, showed an embedded image...the view from the settlement site, looking east across the gray and umber bogs, the reddish light of the rising sun painting the low sky, the scene rendered in broad, impressionistic strokes. A melodramatic image, of course. My critical faculties have probably suffered the same fate as my imagination, but I still liked it. "A big souvenir ashtray," I said to Irvane when he found it.

He gave me an evil look. "Shut up, Leeson."

"Just kidding," I said. The bowl was strangely beautiful, far more so, to my eyes, than the actual vista we saw every day. I thought about the long-dead people who had eaten from this bowl and wondered if they had occasionally felt the same uneasiness with their world that I did.

We found the remains of the colony's central computer, and the oriented crystal stack that comprised its main memory module. This was relatively undamaged and some of us grew cheerful at the thought that we'd be leaving Graylin IV sooner than expected. Irvane's pre-expedition research indicated that they'd had the computer before they became a colony, back when they were still an indentured people on Bonton. As a despised and persecuted minority, they'd had good reason to maintain the privacy of their files, and the stack was encrypted.

Unfortunately the encoding algorithm had been designed in such a way that we could not simply skip to the final days of the colony; we had to decode the log in sequence, since each data unit incorporated the key to the succeeding unit. Irvane set the ship's computer to reconstructing the log, using a brute-force algorithm that yielded only a few months of entries per day. There was no audio, for reasons that Irvane did not bother to explain.

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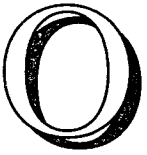
The early entries were fairly dull, concerned with such matters as local terraforming, shelter-building, and the adaptation of crops and livestock to local conditions. Irvane's expert systems pored through the mass of data and chose representative bits for us to consider, which we did every night. At first, watching these records was a painfully tedious duty.



NE MORNING we found a coldsleep worker dead in the ruins just outside the ship's security perimeter, a man we called Flash because he was so slow. The coldsleep workers are convicts, carried in the ship's stasis chambers just like the other supplies. They don't have names anymore; we give them convenient nicknames. We thaw them out when we need an extra pair of hands and ice them down again when we're done with them. They're a harmless lot, no matter what heinous crimes they committed in their former lives, because they've been brainburned into tranquil docility, with just enough intelligence left to feed themselves and follow simple instructions. The polite term for them is "servitor." They're cheaper than mechs and require less maintenance. Still, I don't approve of icicle labor. Call me old-fashioned, but slavery is a Bad Thing, even if the slaves are too stupid to understand their condition. Even if they deserve their condition, or worse.

And also, I'm enough like them to feel a degree of uncomfortable brotherhood. Of course, their crimes were worse than mine and so their punishment was much harsher.

Flash had been operating a sifter for Irvane, and he was supposed to have gone back to the ship's hold at day's end. The mystery was not so much that Flash had died, it was that he hadn't returned to the hold. Usually his nerve collar would have been irresistibly persuasive. Sometimes the icicles just forget to come home and wander about in dull bemusement until the collar reminds them and they run screaming back to the ship. We could all see the line of red flesh under Flash's collar, where the collar had damaged the skin.

All five of us stood looking down at Flash's body. He was a very small man, though strong. He'd died kneeling in the loose gravel by the sifter screen, folded over like an old-time Meccaman praying to his god. "Did the collar cook him after he died?" I asked.

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"Not unless it malfunctioned," Jang said. "Supposed to shut down if the prisoner dies."

I felt vaguely criticized. "I ran every collar through the diagnostic module, before we landed. Part of my job."

"Strange," said Jang. "Maybe a stroke, and he couldn't respond to the collar. Icicles have a high rate of cerebral accidents. The brainburning weakens them."

He touched Flash's body with the toe of his boot and the body toppled sideways. The dead man's face rolled into the light, and we all made our individual sounds of shock and discomfort, except for Jang, who was too self-possessed to react perceptibly. The dead man's eyes were wide with what might have been terror, though I've always thought that describing corpses in such emotional terms is something of an embellishment at best. Most dead people don't seem very happy about their condition. In any case, his lips were pulled back in a toothy fearful grimace, and there was dark brownish blood on his chin from a lacerated lower lip. I saw something white in his hands, which were clasped tightly to his chest.

Irvane, who had made his disinterest in the demise of the icicle obvious, was suddenly galvanized. He knelt beside the corpse and began to pry at the fingers with a delicate little pick.

"Be cautious," said Jang. "Maybe it wasn't a stroke that killed him."

"It's an artifact," said Irvane, oblivious. "Some sort of carved stone, or maybe porcelain." He succeeded in freeing the thing from the corpse's grip and it rolled loose on the gravel.

I think even Irvane was taken aback by what he saw, because he didn't immediately seize the thing. I wouldn't have touched it either. It had a wizened gargoyle face of polished white stone, with a blackened hole in the top of its head. "It's another pipe," someone said.

"Yes," said Irvane. He was looking at the thing's eyes and they were looking at him. Or so it seemed to me. It was as if the thing's eyes, dark and liquid, were moving behind a translucent veil of stone. As if the stone hadn't melted from the eyes completely.

"Don't touch it," said Jang, suddenly.

Irvane picked it up, his large face creased with annoyance, as if in resentful reaction to the sharp tone used by Jang, who was, after all, a mere hireling like me.

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"It's just a clever carving," he said, and then his face slackened in some small, but tangible way. "Still a little warm. Maybe heat from the body."

For some reason everyone edged away from him slightly. But after a moment, Jang reached down and touched the corpse in the center of its chest. "Cold," he said. "He must have died early last night."

I took another step back. For some reason, all my formless anxiety had condensed and sharpened around the little carving. I had, after all, felt watched. And the thing had eyes.

I'm a very simple person now.

"Autopsy him," Hu Moon said.

Jang nodded, and the rest of us went off to our various assignments, Irvane clutching the effigy pipe as tightly as Flash had.

Somewhere there's a manual for expedition leaders which includes a chapter entitled: "Acceptable Social Rituals and How to Organize Them." Hu Moon had instituted a cocktail hour early in the voyage to Graylin IV, and the habit stuck. Every evening before dinner we gathered in the ship for a ration of grog, or whatever social lubricants we preferred, and then we viewed excerpts from the colony log and discussed the day's events.

Oddly enough, as a group we seemed to prefer antique drugs; I suppose this was due to the conservative nature of most academics. Hu Moon was a traditionalist; she took a tot or two of expensive Mundo del Mano rum. Irvane was another traditionalist; he liked to snort a line of organic cocaine, and it made him a little less phlegmatic. Jang smoked cannabis...so much for the Jaworld claim that cannabis is the drug of choice for the peaceful person. Jang's preference was clearly based on other factors.

Dueine and I were the only puritans in the crew; we usually shared a healthful vegetable juice cocktail, though I added a shot of pepper sauce to mine.

Dueine avoided all recreational drugs. She claimed a constitutional propensity for addictive behavior, though she didn't seem old enough to have acquired that sort of knowledge about herself.

Dueine, with the directness of youth, asked me why I didn't participate in any of the available chemical distractions. I just shrugged and smiled, my usual response to difficult questions...I didn't care to discuss

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the specifics of my condition with curious children. She asked me again several times, as if her memory expired every day when she got up, and I'd always given her the same non-answer.

But that night, when she asked, I told her a small part of the truth. "Ah," I said. "Here's the trouble. When I like something, I really like it. Know what I mean?" I leered at her, just to take the curse off this uncharacteristic outburst of semi-honesty.

She recoiled, naturally enough, though she didn't entirely lose her smile. I happened to glance at Hu Moon and saw that she'd fixed me with a cold poisonous glare.

Jang came in, moving in that unnerving soundless way of his, and Hu Moon set her glass aside. "Well? What did you discover?"

"It was a stroke, as we suspected," he said.

She turned to me. "Leeson? I thought you said you checked the collars."

Before I could respond, Jang spoke again. "There was nothing wrong with the collar. It cooked him before he died."

Hu Moon settled back and took up her glass. "So, he was paralyzed, but it took him a while to expire?"

Jang shook his head. "I don't think so. The stroke was sudden and overwhelming. He died almost instantaneously...but after the collar had been cooking him for a long time, or so the data suggest."

"Strange," I said. "I wonder what he found so distracting that he could ignore *that*."

Hu Moon's glance slid over me, dismissively. "What do you think happened?" she asked Jang.

"Don't know," he answered. "It's very odd."

"Anything else?"

Jang paused, as if considering the relevance of his data. "Perhaps. There were faint traces of some sort of fluid on his skin, resembling a mixture of blood and mucus."

Hu Moon looked annoyed. "Oh for.... What are you saying? He was attacked by a pack of giant carnivorous slugs? The ones we haven't noticed yet?"

Jang responded with a small smile. "Possibly. But the substance, as best I can tell, is a simple non-biological imitation of those substances. It

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contains no traces of DNA or any other encoded protein. Fake mucus, fake blood."

A small tense silence ensued. Then Dueine asked a question that seemed to come from no obvious source. "What did you say Flash did? His crime? That got him made into a servitor?"

Jang gave her a level, considering glance. "I didn't say, because I don't know," he said, finally. "Do you think it matters?"

She shrugged.

"Well," Jang said. "Here is my recommendation: we should avoid using icicle labor if possible. The controllers seem to be functioning unreliably, and we don't know why."

Hu Moon nodded. "I'll consider your advice," she said.

A chime summoned us to the holotank set up in the center of the ship's lounge. We took seats, and Hu Moon sat next to me. The lights lowered and she leaned against me. I might have enjoyed the contact, except that it was obviously not a friendly one. "Leave Dueine alone," she hissed in my ear. "Can't you see that you make her uncomfortable?"

"Sorry," I said, not taking her very seriously.

She made a faint spitting noise. "There are a dozen icicles left in the hold. If you can't control your sexual urges, let me know and I'll have one thawed for you. One of the women is quite fetching."

I sat in the dark with my ears burning and a lump of rage in my throat. I know that I'm less subtle now than other people, but I can still recognize cruelty when it's offered to me.

We watched scenes from the colony's fifth year.

They had been a fairly small group, less than a hundred, but clever enough to understand the problems associated with limited gene pools. Toddlers ran to and fro under the brown sunlight, and none of them looked much like their parents, though they had the dark skin and curly hair of the colonists, the black eyes and everted lips that had survived the centuries since their ancestors left Jaworld. Probably most of the children had been carried aboard as embryos frozen in stasis boxes, but likely some of the youngest came from living wombs. As the colonists had grown more secure in their new home, some of the women had evidently decided to take the time to gestate babies and were visibly pregnant.

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The houses were quietly attractive, long low structures built from the gray fossil coral that cropped out here and there, the steep roofs thatched with plasticized marsh reeds. The doors and window frames were painted ultramarine blue, a touch of pure color in an otherwise umber and sepia landscape.

The colonists wore simple utilitarian garments of gray-brown fiber, identical to the universal one-piece shipsuits still in use these many centuries later. I could see, however, that fashion was raising its inconstant head. Some of the women had begun to wear colorful scarves wrapped at the waist. In their hair, in lieu of the flowers which had not evolved on Graylin IV, many wore the shells of fossil molluscs, thin shiny black disks with a faint blueish opalescence, strung like beads on cord dyed the same blue as the doors.

Tonight the ship's computer had chosen to show us scenes from a possibly religious ceremony, one which took place every day at sunset. Anyway, this was Hu Moon's interpretation. I thought it possible that the leaders of the colony had read the same book on expedition socialization as Hu Moon, but I kept this speculation to myself.

The babies were put into their cribs and the adults drifted into a small plaza at the center of the settlement, faces washed and hair combed, wearing looks of mild expectation.

The computer edited out much of the footage, since there's little excitement to be found in a large quiet group of people watching the sun go down. Occasionally the holocamera would move in close, to fill our tank with a single face.

Here was a middle-aged man with thin sharp features, puffing on a hand-rolled cigarette, slanted eyes half-closed. He still wore his hair in the matted ropes that had at times been fashionable on Jaworld, but I noticed that many of the younger colonists had abandoned the style. Once I'd wondered aloud why they hadn't just gone back to Jaworld, when Bonton became too dangerous. Irvane had instructed me in Jaworld history, telling me that the Jaworlders had come to value the depopulation resulting from the notorious Ganja Wars, when so many had died or emigrated from their beautiful world, including the ancestors of the dead colonists. The Jaworlders had instituted strict controls on reproduction and ended immigration. The only visitors they welcomed were tourists,

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who came, spent their money, and left. They made no exceptions for expatriate groups.

The camera moved to an old woman with bloodshot eyes and a cloud of frizzy white hair, who held a chillum expertly between her big-knuckled fingers, and who released clouds of white smoke into the waning light, laughing silently.

Many of the smokers sat by themselves, but here and there small groups passed fat spliffs from hand to hand. No one spoke.

The camera lingered especially long on a beautiful young woman, with skin as black and polished as the shells she wore in her long, softly waved hair. I supposed that the camera operator had, or hoped for, an intimate connection with her, so lovingly was she framed. The ruddy light of sunset haloed her. She sat apart from the others, smoking from a simple bamboo-stemmed brass pipe, her expression inward and unreadable, even when the camera zoomed in so that her heavy-lidded eyes filled the screen.

"One of the community's pipemakers, Suhaili," said our computer in its soft artificial voice. "A person of high status, a status derived from her important calling and from substantial personal charisma."

I could understand that. Across the centuries, she seemed as real to me as any of my companions, and more interesting. Strange to think how long she'd been dead, strange to think that some of the bone chips Irvane had sifted from the site might have belonged to that elegant creature.

I found this a sad thought, too. I had no more urge to socialize, so I left the ship, returned to my own shelter module and tried to sleep.

THE PERIMETER ALARM shrieked, waking me an hour after midnight. I rolled from my cot, groggy and confused, but I remembered to grab the weapon I'd been issued, a short-barreled smartgun that wouldn't fire while pointed at any of the expedition's members, the ship, or at any critical life-support systems. It was the perfect weapon for an untrained person. I hoped the others were similarly armed.

I ran outside. A naked dead woman four meters tall was staggering along the perimeter, screaming in brassy harmony with the alarm. I say she was a dead woman because her enormous belly was ripped open from

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breastbone to pubis, though nothing but blood had spilled from the wound. In fact, it seemed to me that there was nothing but emptiness inside the woman, and I wondered where she found breath to make those terrible sounds.

Her skin was that horrid blue-gray color that invades corpses, her eyes seemed to look in different directions, her arms hung stiffly at her sides. Her great size somehow emphasized the impossible horror of her existence.

I thought I was hallucinating until the stuttergun atop the security module fired a long burst and cut her into tumbling fragments.

Jang stood beside the module, wearing black monomol armor and equipped with a shoulder-mounted weapon almost as powerful as the stuttergun. He tapped at a wrist-mounted dataslate; evidently he had ordered the stuttergun to fire.

"What...?" I asked.

"No idea," he said in his soft monotone. I couldn't see his expression behind the mirror visor of his helmet, but I doubted his face would show any of the confusion I felt.

Irvane arrived, clad in a fashionably mauve version of Jang's armor, waving a gun even bigger than Jang's. He resembled a dangerous grape. "What was it?" he asked in a voice full of disbelief and fear; evidently he had seen the thing from his shelter.

Dueine appeared in her doorway, dressed charmingly in a pair of bunny-rabbit bedroom slippers and nothing else, eyes rolling, face white. She seemed to be on the verge of violent nausea, throat working, hands clasped between her pretty breasts. I averted my eyes politely, until Hu Moon shouted for her and she stumbled back into their shelter.

"Get me a sample, Leeson," Jang said, offering me a specimen case. "If you would be so kind."

I took the case, though my first impulse was to hand it back. "Sample of what?"

"Its flesh...or whatever it was made out of," Jang said looking over my shoulder. "Better hurry."

I twitched around and saw that the chunks of shattered monster were apparently melting into the ground. A disturbing crawling motion accompanied this disappearance. I wasn't enthusiastic, but of course I *was* the

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most expendable member of the expedition, except for the icicles. So when Jang briefly switched off the perimeter sensors and waved me across the line, I went...more or less willingly.

I trotted out toward the monster's remaining bits. At closer range, these seemed to be devolving into a myriad of tiny white wormlike forms, which then disappeared writhing into the ground. I knelt beside the largest remaining piece of monster flesh, and activated the case, which snapped shut on the stuff, along with a bit of lichen and soil.

I shook it; it rattled like a stone.

Hu Moon came forth as I returned from the perimeter with my sample. She was somewhat rumpled and smelled of sex. Her manner conveyed suspicious annoyance, as though she blamed us for the event that had disturbed her evening.

"So, what was it?" she asked in a brittle voice. "Jang, this is your area of expertise. What do you know?"

"Almost nothing," Jang said politely. He took the sample case from me. "Did you get anything?" he asked me.

"I think so," I said. "You won't believe it, but the stuff, the stuff that wiggled away...it looked like white stone. Wiggly stone."

"'Wiggly stone'? What next?" Hu Moon was clearly exasperated. "You're not supposed to have any imagination."

"So I'm told," I said, looking at my feet.

Jang shook the sample case and it still rattled. I looked up to see him smiling at me with what seemed genuine sympathy. "Sounds like stone, doesn't it?" he said to Hu Moon.

She shook her head. "Tell me what's really going on. First thing in the morning." She went back to bed and I wondered how she could be so incurious about an event that appeared, to me at least, to defy rationality. If a giant dead woman had indeed marched wailing around our camp, then the universe had gone crazy and nothing could be relied on. I shuddered. How could there be a reassuring explanation for such a thing? Perhaps I felt this way because of my crippled mind, my burned-away imagination, but of course there's no way to know.

Irvane, who had said nothing, turned away from the darkness beyond the perimeter and gave me a look full of uncertainty. "I'm going in," he

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said in a voice taut with incipient hysteria. "I intend to sleep late, and without any other bad dreams."

As he returned to his shelter, he held his oversized gun ready in both hands.

"Leeson," said Jang. "Thank you for your assistance."

I nodded, grateful for his kindness. "Well," I said. "Good night."

In the morning the sunlight seemed treacherous, something that only hid the darkness. I went out to the site, the mapping robot trundling obediently at my heels. Jang was already there, still armored and armed. He pushed up his visor to greet me.

"Good morning," he said. Despite the affectless manner in which he spoke, he always managed to give the impression of courteous attention. I suppose even if you are a creature as dangerous as Jang, it's usually better to avoid conflict. It's a puzzle why ordinary humans, so much softer, so much more vulnerable, often fail to behave as sensibly. But of course, I can only speculate in a fairly limited way. I'm certain that my imagination is not entirely destroyed, because how could a person be human without some bit of creative capacity? How could I even wonder about these things, if I were entirely unable to imagine something other than what I see and hear? But so many things puzzle me now. I wonder if I were more *certain*, before the treatments. It seems to me that I must have been, but I don't know if that was really a good thing.

I set the mapping robot to work in its assigned sector. Jang waited until the robot had begun its pattern, and then he gestured for me to join him under the canopy that protected the sifters and other machinery. I wondered what he could want with me, but I was willing to be distracted from my thoughts. We sat on a bench and I stared out at the site, as if I were greatly interested in the slow careful movements of the robot.

"Leeson," he said. "Tell me what you saw last night."

"I saw a dead giant. She walked and screamed. Isn't that what you saw?"

"It was," he answered. "Everyone else saw her, too. I wanted to ask you because of your special circumstances. If we were all imagining her, I thought it possible that you had seen something else."

"You're diplomatic," I said.

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He ignored this, but after a moment, he spoke again. "If you will not think me discourteous, I would like to know how you came to be modified."

"'Modified'?" I said this with unintended bitterness. The loss was still close to the surface, even though in the strictest sense I hadn't been deprived of anything I was still using.

"If you would find it distressing to talk about, then never mind," said Jang.

"No," I said. "I don't really mind telling you. Sometimes it helps a bit to whine, and hardly anyone ever asks to hear the whole sordid tale." I summoned a smile. I suppose it was a weak one.

"I was an artist, though probably not a very good one. But my pictures sold often enough to keep me fed, so I can't complain. Better painters have starved. I've known a few.

"Anyway, I had a bad experience, on Noctile. I loved something that couldn't love me...a story as old as the universe, I guess. When I returned, I felt less satisfaction with my work, though I was never that confident of its value. It got worse; I drugged myself, I used stemstim, I acquired the most beautiful lovers I could find and discarded them at a fairly offensive rate. But I still painted enough to pay my bills, so...no problem.

"Then I had another little adventure, trying to recapture the pleasure I'd once taken in making pictures. The adventure showed me how far from significance my work really was, and I found this difficult to accept. I gave myself over entirely to dissipation. I didn't paint anymore. It was fun for a while, I guess."

Jang nodded, as if he understood. Which was unlikely, of course, but I gave him credit for good manners. "And then?" he asked.

I shrugged. "The usual story. When I'd sunk deep enough in debt, my creditors had me committed to a rehabilitation clinic. The staff concluded that my troubles stemmed from my drug dependencies, so they cured me."

"Hence your disability?"

"Yes. The human response to many psychoactive drugs — the ones I liked anyway — is linked to the creative process. If you take away one, you take away the other. Drugs aren't fun anymore. You can take all you like and...nothing."

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"It's not really like brainburning, I understand," Jang said.

"No, no. There's no physical damage to the brain; I'm not an icicle. I have a nanomonitor in my head, a system of sensors, taggers, and phages. My production of neurochemicals is kept strictly within certain parameters. Only so much serotonin, for example, and each molecule is tagged with an authorized code, so that only my own native neurochemicals are allowed to bind with my receptors."

I laughed nervously. "There are advantages, I suppose. I'm never too sad or too happy."

"What does that mean...'too happy'?" Jang's emotions were rarely visible on his face. But I thought I detected a faint edge of amusement in his gaze.

"There's sometimes a thin line between joy and mania." I spoke sharply, and instantly regretted it. Jang was really my only friend on this empty world.

"Oh, yes," he said, and I could detect no irritation in his tone. "In fact I've heard that the only difference is that mania lasts longer than joy. And of course I know that those who suffer only from mania often resist treatment."

I laughed again, this time with genuine pleasure. "There you have it. I'm protected from the excesses of chemical ecstasy, as well as the excesses of artistic inspiration."

"Your doctors...they weren't concerned that they were taking your livelihood?"

I shrugged. "A civilized society needs its citizens to pay their bills. Much more than it needs yet another mediocre artist. But I suppose they decided it was moot. As I said, I wasn't painting anymore. Anyway, most folks have a lot more imagination than they really need, they say."

"Is that what they say?" Jang asked with just the faintest hint of skepticism.

"Yes." I noticed that my fists were clenched. "Yes." I try never to think too long about that very bad time, oddly memorable, when I was drowning myself in chemical distractions. I suppose I had to stop. And they insisted that my death as an artist was just an unavoidable side effect of my treatment. Though sometimes I think that isn't true, that it was a punishment. Sometimes I think that the "side effect" was developed

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along with the treatment in order to frighten artists into responsible drug use. We, after all, seem to be the segment of the population most flamboyantly attracted to excessive stimulation.

I'd thought myself brave and clever and fashionably cynical, making jokes about my inability to paint, back when it was only weakness and self-pity that stopped me from working. I suppose I thought it was temporary. Now that my inability is real and permanent, I see what a fool I was.

"This nanomonitor," Jang asked. "Will it always be with you? Does it ever require adjustment or other maintenance?"

"Occasionally," I said. "Every six months, standard, I develop a deep yearning to revisit my benefactors. Recalibration time. They tell me that bad things can happen if I somehow avoid this compulsion. Program drift, odd obsessions, possible madness."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Jang said.

I took a deep breath and shrugged. "Well, it's not so bad. I can't really tell that anything is missing. That's how it is, they tell me. And they gave me a new name and face, to spare me any embarrassment, should I ever run into my old cronies. Disengagement from the addictive circumstances, they call it. All part of the treatment."

"I see," said Jang. "What of your skills, your technical training? Did the process take them away, too?"

"No, I don't think so," I said. "No, if you showed me an apple, I could probably still make a painting of it, and it would look like an apple. But it would only be an apple, neither more nor less, except by sheer accident. So I'm told, though I admit I've never felt like making the trial."

Jang considered this. A long silence passed, while I tried to calm myself. The conversation had become unexpectedly uncomfortable. Usually I'm so grateful to be treated as a fully human person that I don't mind a little awkwardness. But this was too much, somehow.

Finally Jang stirred and spoke. "Leeson, I'd like to ask a favor of you. Would you do a sketch of the dead woman for me? We have the security camera images, but they were poorly defined, since she was well outside the perimeter. Hu Moon will issue you a slate and metastylus."

"I suppose so," I answered. "Why?"

"I'm a completist," Jang said, with one of his almost imperceptible smiles.

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"What about the analysis?" I asked, as Jang rose from the bench.

"The stone? It was curious stuff, quartz mainly, with a few rare earth inclusions and veins of magnetite. Odd crystalline structure, and nanoscale vesicles filled with sodium silicate. The ship computer seems to think it might become somewhat malleable, with a slight shift in the orientation. Similar in some ways to known silicon-based life forms, but no exact correspondences." Jang nodded, closed his visor, and returned to the ship.

I WAS SITTING in the ship's observatory level, staring at the unmarked slate, when the alarm went off again.

This time I didn't rush to arm myself. I assumed Jang would deal with whatever specter was currently visiting the camp, and I didn't think I would be able to make any vital contribution to the defense. I went to the nearest port, which looked out on the camp and the ruins.

I caught a glimpse of Jang, armored and moving with unnatural swiftness. He passed through the perimeter and into the ruins. One of Graylin IV's small moons shed a dim light over the wasteland, but in his black armor Jang disappeared into the shadows, so that I soon lost sight of him.

Hu Moon's voice crackled over the ship's intercom. "Leeson! Where are you?"

"Here, in the lounge," I said, still trying to see where Jang had gone.

"Is Irvane with you?"

"No. I'm alone. What's happening?"

But there was no answer. After a while the alarm cut off abruptly and the ship filled with silence.

I didn't want to go down to the perimeter, particularly. But in this case it seemed to me that I should find out why the alarm had sounded, and if some danger threatened. Aimless curiosity is one thing most of us can do without, but too much detachment can be dangerous, as I had been told by those who supervised my treatment. "You still have to pay attention to your environment," they said. "Even if it doesn't interest you very much."

At the northern edge of the perimeter, I found Hu Moon. She wore a

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suit of antique power armor, which had the appearance of tarnished silver inlaid with swirling gold lines in the pattern of her tattoos. Very stylish, I thought. She peered intently into the dark wastelands, a small graser held ready in her hands.

Dueine was peering from the doorway of their shelter, clutching the collar of her robe, her face tautly fearful. I couldn't see Irvane and evidently Jang was still outside. I approached Hu Moon, who whirled and pointed her weapon at me. I stopped and raised my hands carefully, in case she had a dumb gun.

"Just me," I said.

"Leeson," she said in a strained voice. "Where's your weapon? You're supposed to arm yourself whenever the alarm sounds."

"Sorry," I said. "I'll get it now." But she'd already turned back to the darkness.

I got my smartgun and wished I owned a suit of power armor, as everyone else apparently did.

I assumed a suitably subservient position just behind Hu Moon and tried to see what she was looking for. "What is it?" I asked.

"Another impossibility," she said. "And we can't find Irvane."

"Impossibility? More dead giants?"

She shook her helmeted head impatiently. "No. Let's not get into it just now, all right? Just keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. In fact, why don't you make yourself useful? Go watch the south perimeter until Jang returns. Shout if you see anything strange."

I was dismissed. I went reluctantly to the other side of the perimeter, which overlooked the remnants of the colony. The worn bones of the walls were pale stripes in the moonlight; the site was as peaceful as a graveyard.

The creatures seemed to rise from the ground.

There were dozens of them, squat and powerful, their naked almost-human bodies knotty with muscle, their skin white as marble. They might have been the trolls of Old Earth legends, or goblins or other fairy tale grotesques. But their faces were the faces of beautiful evil children, wearing small malicious smiles. They were so strange that I couldn't for a moment make a sound. They were still, but not as still as statues; they occasionally shifted position slightly, an inhumanly subtle movement that accented their impossibility.

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They watched me with hungry lovely eyes; they looked like they wanted to kill me and eat me, but only after torturing me to the point of death. I suppose this might seem an excess of imagination, but I have no imagination. So I think I must have perceived the message of those terrible angelic faces accurately, though I could not now say exactly what there was about their expressions that seemed so dreadful. The faces were undistorted by anger or madness or any of the obvious darker human emotions.

I finally found my voice and croaked out a wordless sound of alarm, just as the main stuttergun swiveled toward the south. Hu Moon ran to me, armor clanking and whirring.

"What...?" she started to say, but then she saw the creatures.

"What are they?" I whispered.

"Not real," she said firmly, shouldering her weapon.

I was wondering whether we ought to wait for Jang's return before committing any irrevocable act when she fired a long burst from her gun and shattered the nearest creature.

It disintegrated as if struck by a great hammer, its remnants clattering like gravel along the ground.

The other creatures took no notice, still watching us with undiminished intensity, or so it seemed.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked.

"Shut up, Leeson," she answered. There seemed to be an edge of hysteria in her voice, for which I didn't blame her. I watched the creatures, who seemed unruffled by the death of their fellow goblin. She aimed at another and now the creatures flickered into swift erratic movement, moving in no discernible pattern beyond the perimeter, gray blurs in the uncertain light. The muzzle of her weapon jerked here and there, indecisively, and even I could tell that hitting one of the creatures would have been very difficult.

"What are they doing?" she said, finally.

"Playing hard to get," I guessed.

Hu Moon kept her weapon trained on them, but did not fire again.

After a minute she asked, "If they come inside the perimeter, I don't know if the autoguns can deal with them. Why isn't Jang back?"

I might have mentioned my last glimpse of him, but she was clearly not interested in conversation with me.

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Finally she turned away from the impossible creatures. "I'm going back to Dueine. She's frightened."

"Me too," I said, and in the moment I took my attention away from the creatures, they disappeared, as if into the ground. Which I suppose was exactly what happened.

Hu Moon looked back and her pale face grew paler in the glow of her helmet light, the blue contour lines of her tattoos too bright now.

"I can't deal with this," she muttered, and I knew she was still wondering if Jang would return.

But in the morning, just after a redly ominous dawn, the weapons master returned, carrying a naked and mutilated body across his armored shoulder. He dropped Irvane just inside the perimeter and sat down heavily.

Hu Moon was there, still armored and armed. "What happened," she croaked, in a thick sleep-deprived voice.

Jang shrugged. "They killed him."

Jang's armor was scuffed and dusty. Here and there were small dents, as if stone fists had shattered against the metal.

Hu Moon knelt beside Irvane's corpse. His neck was purple with bruises; his genitals had been torn away. Dozens of small eruptions of tattered flesh marked him in a random pattern. It almost looked as though the tissues had been ripped open by explosions beneath the skin. I saw that the spiral of fur I found so amusing did indeed continue below his waist, with a line branching off toward his groin, where presumably it had encircled his missing penis.

"How?" asked Hu Moon. "And who were 'they'?"

"Monsters or mineral formations," said Jang. "Take your pick." His voice, as controlled as always through his helmet speaker, no longer seemed as polite, a perception that Hu Moon apparently shared with me.

"Could you possibly be less informative," she said, and turned to face him, her posture expressing cold disapproval.

"Here is my recommendation," Jang said. He unlatched his helmet and removed it. "Terminate the dig and stand off in orbit until a quarantine ship can get here."

"What?" Hu Moon barked. "What are you talking about?"

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"Two obvious possibilities exist," Jang said. "Either we've contracted some sort of disease or other condition that causes shared hallucinations with attendant violent behavior...in which case we must not return to any inhabited world, lest it be contagious...or we have some heretofore undiscovered and malevolent life form preying on us, in which case we would be foolish to remain on the surface."

"An oversimplification, surely!" said Hu Moon sharply. "Aren't we safe here inside the perimeter?"

"Perhaps," said Jang. "Irvane left the perimeter, apparently by his own choice. The goblins took him away and made use of him before he died." He indicated an area on Irvane's chest where the flesh was particularly torn. "Cruel kisses," he said.

I didn't understand what he meant, not immediately. Then I got it — kisses so fierce they ruptured the flesh. I shuddered.

"What did you do about it?" Hu Moon moved away from the corpse, which was indeed difficult to look at. "And what do you mean, 'goblins'?"

"They didn't look like goblins to you?" Jang asked. "They were hard to kill. Very quick, very strong. Stone and quicksilver. I almost died. I destroyed only a few of them. At dawn they went away, or I'd be dead."

"The important thing is that they're gone," said Hu Moon.

"It's possible the survivors will be back." Jang unlocked his gauntlets and removed them. He flexed his fingers slowly, as though they were painful to move.

"But what if they were just a shared hallucination?" Hu Moon asked.

"Then," said Jang, with a rare glittering grin, "I killed Irvane, and almost killed myself. And I'm here with you, inside the perimeter."

Hu Moon drew back fastidiously, her finely shaped mouth in a tight line. "We'll discuss this again after you've rested," she said, and walked away.

No work was done on the site that day.

In the evening we gathered at our usual time to watch the day's computer decoding. I was startled to find that I missed Irvane's phlegmatic presence. Dueine was red-eyed and uncombed; she sat down beside me, ignoring an icy glance from Hu Moon.

"It's terrible, isn't it?" Dueine said. "Did you see him?"

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"Yes," I said, sipping my vegetable cocktail. Tonight I'd put an extra dash of hot sauce in it.

"I didn't." She looked as though she might start sniffling at any moment. "Moon wouldn't let me. I guess that's better."

"Umm," I said noncommittally.

"I didn't like him." Dueine drew her mouth down into a gesture of distaste. "I always had the feeling he was a lech, and not a nice one, like you."

I was surprised by this outburst of uncomfortable honesty and didn't know how to reply.

She continued, in a low voice. "Once he asked me how old I was, and when I told him I was twenty-three standard, he didn't seem as interested as before. Do you know what I mean? I look young for my age, I know. Moon says I'll be glad someday."

I could feel Hu Moon's frozen glare on my back, but Dueine no longer looked like she might burst into tears. Evidently her fright had been replaced by disgust, a more containable emotion.

I couldn't help remembering the faces of the goblins, the faces of angelic children who might do anything. I shuddered. There was some unpleasant connection there that my burned-away imagination might have made, once.

Jang clarified the matter. He slipped in, still wearing the sweat-stained quilted undersuit that padded his battle armor, an air of distraction further masking his face. There was a trembling of nervous energy in the way he moved that I hadn't seen before. He selected a cigarette from the communal humidor, lit it, and took a deep drag.

"I've done a bit of research," he said, speaking from a cloud of smoke. "We're a somewhat flawed group, and this fact may have something to do with the phenomena we've witnessed these last several days."

Hu Moon made a faint disparaging grunt. "I don't see...," she began.

Jang spoke over her. "Let's consider Flash, the dead icicle. He was condemned to brain-limited servitude for a series of murders. These were particularly vile — he killed pregnant human women and eviscerated them." Jang paused to take another hit. This time no one interrupted him.

"Flash chose his victims carefully," Jang continued. "They were all very large women. Flash, as you may remember, was a small man. When

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he was finally apprehended, he was hiding within the body cavity of his last victim. The authorites assumed this was a pattern duplicated in all his murders. He refused to explain his purpose, but the jurists at his trial assumed some psychosexual obsession."

"He must have been crazy," Dueine said, unnecessarily.

"Yes," said Jang politely. "But, as Flash was a nobody, distinguished only by his crimes, no one cared to delve into the whys and wherefores. So he was summarily brainburned and put into inventory."

We were all remembering the giant dead woman, or so I supposed.

"What about Irvane?" I asked.

Jang sighed and took another puff. "I checked his will."

"His will?" Hu Moon seemed irritated by Jang's initiative.

He shrugged. "Sometimes people use their wills to seek absolution for past misdeeds or to complain of past mistreatment. I thought it worth a try, since his will became a public record upon Irvane's death. You all signed similar disclosure papers before we embarked."

"What did you find?"

"Irvane used his will to name his likely assassin, should he be found dead."

"He was worried about being killed?" Hu Moon seemed skeptical.

"Yes. With good reason," said Jang. "Irvane's frailty had to do with the sexual exploitation of children. Have none of you wondered what a scientist of his reputation was doing on a relatively unimportant expedition?"

Hu Moon made a hissing sound of disapproval. "There are no unimportant expeditions, in the field of pangalac archaeology."

"No doubt," Jang said. "I intended no offense."

"What did he do?" Dueine asked, oblivious to Jang's attempted diplomacy. Her eyes were wide, and I wondered if she had failed to understand the implications of Jang's words. I am not stupid, and I felt a perverse pleasure in my sudden certainty that Irvane and I were not the only misfits on Graylin IV. On the other hand, I now had further cause for resentment. My crime was spending other people's money. Irvane's was much worse, or so it seemed to me, yet he got away unchanged.

"Irvane made a mistake," Jang said. "For most of his life, he pursued his hobbies among children he found aboard various Holding Arks,

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children who were desperate for any form of subsidy, no matter the source or the cost. Children who could see Irvane as a benefactor, despite his unpleasant attentions. But in a thoughtless moment, he initiated an inappropriate relationship with the young son of Angus Drimm, the notorious Howlytown magnate from Dilvermoon."

Hu Moon raised her eyebrows. "Odd that he survived. One hears stories about Drimm and his kind."

"Evidently he thought it best to depart Dilvermoon for a time. Perhaps Irvane hoped to be among Drimm's less important enemies by the time he returned from Graylin." Jang sat and shook his head. "Personally, I think his strategy was poorly considered."

"Maybe Irvane was killed by Howlytown enforcers," Dueine said fearfully.

I sighed. Hu Moon rolled her eyes. Only Jang was kind enough to explain. "I think not," he said. "Whatever the creatures were, they were not human, or members of any other sapient species of which I'm aware."

A thick uneasy silence followed, as each of us considered the matter in our own way. Dueine's eyes watered and her plump lower lip trembled. Hu Moon maintained a stony expression, though she seemed to have developed a small twitch under one large eye, and Jang was, as always, still and self-contained. I felt an odd anxious relief. I'd been proven right. There was something to fear, here on this dull little world, and I had been the first one to feel it. Leeson had noticed something that four uncrippled people had missed. Well, Jang had sensed something. Maybe the others, too, and they just hadn't felt the need to talk to me about it.

"I don't understand," Dueine said. "What does this have to do with how he died? How Flash died?"

Hu Moon spoke impatiently to her protégé. "Didn't you see the creatures? Terrible children, weren't they?"

Insight widened Dueine's eyes. "Oh," she said.

Jang nodded. "It's my guess that the dead giant and the terrible children were the creation of their victims. They imagined them into existence, somehow. I don't know how this is possible, but we all saw the creatures." Jang's soft voice changed slightly, took on a barely perceptible dramatic edge, a tone I had never heard from him. "We seem to have fallen into a fairy tale."

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A question occurred to me. "How did Flash imagine such a monster? He was brainburned."

Jang looked at me. "The brainburning procedure used with criminals like Flash is unsophisticated. It's only necessary to subtract volition. No one bothers with the fine details. No one cares enough about them to weed away former obsessions from icicle convicts — who cares what they think about, so long as they are incapable of acting? Any associated suffering is well-deserved, most people say."

I don't think he was speaking about me.

"Besides," Hu Moon said, "Flash wasn't killed by his monster. Or not directly."

"A point," said Jang. "But he got to see it, it would seem, and his excitement reached a fatal level. Another point: Irvane went willingly with his children — they didn't touch him until he left the perimeter." He paused. "I think we're safe inside the perimeter...but I'll set up more gun pods."

The longest silence yet followed. I suppose they were all wondering about the things that might be birthed from their darkest imaginings. Wondering if those things could kill us.

Finally Hu Moon shook her head. "Well, we're not criminals, Dueine and I. We should be safe."

I looked away. I felt immune, of course, and somehow desolate.

EVENTUALLY WE TURNED our attention to the day's accumulation of decoded records. The colony computer's memory stack had been more heavily damaged on the uppermost layers, and as we approached the end of the record, the images began to deteriorate in quality. The video enhancement was unsatisfactory. Whenever the computer was forced to bridge over a bad segment, the video had that plastic antiseptic quality that inevitably marks computer reconstruction. Some segments were entirely inaccessible and caused odd jumps in the video. The computer sometimes added informative captions to the more obscure scenes.

That night we watched a funeral. One adult and a child were laid out beside a hole large enough for both, the bodies wrapped tightly in gray ship-issue cloth. The other colonists stood about the burial site, wearing

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solemn faces, heads bowed, listening to a chaplain who spoke beside the hole, his eyes wide, his gestures dramatic, his gray dreadlocks flying. His audience seemed nervous, their eyes furtive. Those at the fringes of the crowd seemed especially uneasy, occasionally turning to glance at the empty wilderness behind them.

The chaplain finished his eulogy and the bodies were carefully lowered into the hole. Two men came forward with shovels and began to fill the grave. Some of the nearest mourners sobbed, but most of the colonists hurried away, their eyes anxious.

The computer skipped ahead, until the hole was full and only three mourners remained.

One was Suhaili the Pipemaker, wearing a black mourning veil that hid her expression. Across the grave a tall man with harsh features held the hand of a small child. His face was wooden with loss; the child was too young for anything but confusion and fear.

She spoke to the man; he looked away without replying. She raised a hand in a pleading gesture, but he turned and marched out of the camera's frame. Suhaili stood alone above the grave, and after a moment she covered her face with her hands and her shoulders began to shake. The camera operator receded, until she was a tiny figure against the gray landscape.

Jang went to the console and shut down the holotank. "Enough of that," he said.

In my shelter that night, when the camp was silent, I tried my hand at making a drawing of the giantess. The stylus flew over the slate with surprising ease as I sketched a rough charcoal of the thing...screaming, wide-mouthed, in mid-stagger, with arms lifted in horrid entreaty. I felt nothing but a growing sickness in my stomach. I formed no connection with the image I was making, other than the weighing of light and dark, the calculations of angles and lines, the mechanical addition of texture, all premeditated, lifeless, meaningless movements of my hand. I felt what must have been a pale echo of the sort of grief I'd once felt watching a holovid of a dear lost lover. The watchers in my brain must have been busy.

At breakfast, Hu Moon announced that we would continue with the dig. She was moody, but definite. "I see no reason to waste the University's

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funds by returning to Dilvermoon now. We've had a death among our group.

"Naturally we're upset, but such things sometimes happen on wild worlds. I won't abandon my responsibilities because of some foolish theory."

She gave Jang a dark look, but his face was placid and he nodded. "You're the expedition leader," he said. "It's your decision."

"Yes, it is," she said firmly. "This will mean more work, but I'm sure we'll all compensate. Leeson, you'll run the materials analyzer today. Dueine will tend the mapping mech."

Dueine pouted. "But I meant to update my journals today. So much has happened."

Hu Moon had no patience with her protégé. "Things have changed," she snapped. Dueine's eyes seemed to water, but she nodded submissively.

Later I handed my drawing to Jang. He took it with a murmur of thanks, but made no comment, for which I was grateful.

During the following days we found more of the pipes carved from the white stone, though the one Irvane had kept seemed to have disappeared. The pipes were often stylized little effigies, slewed into some disturbing shape. There was one pipe with a bowl carved to resemble a head with tangled hair and a mouth ringed with inward-hooking needle teeth — a lamprey eel in human form. We found several well-made turtle pipes, each with a face carved into its back, and each face presented a different emotion in starkly stylized form: terror, joy, sexual abandon, grief. Whenever we discovered a pipe made of the white stone that I'd taken from the fragments of the dead giantess, Jang put them into a security locker, to which only he and Hu Moon had access.

An archaeologist, I think, could have written a good monograph on cannabis pipes produced by a culture obsessed with the drug and its adjuncts. Some of the most powerful art I've seen was born from some variety of religious mania — the cathedrals of Old Earth, the spirit caverns of Odun VII, the widow pools of Noctile. To my once-educated eye, the pipes left by the dead colony, though less ostentatious than those familiar examples, were in their own way just as profound. Any object, however

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mundane, if used in a daily religious ritual must inevitably come to have great significance for its user. And these objects were extraordinary to begin with.

My favorite find was a pipe carved to resemble a female torso, curving up from the pipestem like a cobra. Her face was hidden behind a veil of delicate hair, which billowed back around her back and surrounded the bowl. The stone that formed the hair was so thinly carved that light glimmered through it, showing a faint internal opalescence.

This was one of Suhaili's finest works, as I saw from the reconstructed computer record one evening.

The ship showed us a scene in Suhaili Pipemaker's workshop, a roofed-over arcade at the back of her house. She had cultivated a hedge of tall ferny plants at the edge of the flagstone floor, and they cast a soft dappled light over her as she sat at a lapidary grinder. I imagined the screech of stone against the spinning abrasive wheel, the smell of hot mineral dust, the perfume of the woman...something rich and strange. Hu Moon had worked us unmercifully on the site, and this night I was so tired that I was in danger of slipping into a dream. I was willing to dream of Suhaili. Over the past few days my interest in her had deepened and become something close to infatuation. I watched the nightly archives hoping for a glimpse of her, though lately she was rarely seen. Perhaps the romance between her and the camera operator had waned, a thought I found childishly pleasing. Apparently desire could somehow span the centuries that separated us.

She turned toward the camera, something small and white in her hands. As if the cameraman's eyes had widened and fixed on the object she held, the viewpoint zoomed in, to fill the holotank with the pipe glittering white against the dark pink of her palm.

"We found that yesterday," I said, surprised by this sudden connection to the present. The pipe she held then, two thousand years past, was the same as the one I'd discovered under a frost-heaved tussock of moss at the far side of the site.

"Where did it come from?" Hu Moon asked, frowning at her dataslate. "Ah. I see the arcade, and here, the rest of the structure. Leeson! Tomorrow, you'll move the excavator to that spot. The pipemaker seems pivotal in whatever is going on; we'll concentrate on her house for a while."

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"Yes," I said, still watching the tank. The camera jerked away from the pipe and zoomed in on Suhaili's face. Again I admired the clarity and perfection of her features. Her cheekbones were high and smoothly prominent under flawless black velvet skin. Her lips were full. Her eyes were large, heavy-lidded, tilted up at the outer corners. They suddenly widened in shock, and the camera spun away from her to follow the pipe as it bounced away along the tiled floor, obviously slapped from her hand by the camera operator. The viewpoint slid up to jiggle aimlessly across the thatched ceiling of the arcade.

"They're arguing," Jang said.

"What about?" wondered Dueine.

I think it was clear to the rest of us that the disagreement concerned the pipe. To me, at least, it was obvious that the pipes were dangerous. Flash found a pipe and died. Irvane took the pipe and died. It suddenly struck me that if Irvane had not taken the pipe with him when he had gone out to meet the terrible children, then someone still had it.

That night we saw the metal warriors for the first time.

There was no alarm when they came, because Jang was waiting for them. He'd installed additional security sensors on the site, so that he would be notified if anything larger than an insect moved amid the ruins. He woke me from a disturbing dream about the pipemaker, in which she offered me a black pipe carved with my own face. I was confused and resentful on waking, because this was the most interesting dream I'd had since my treatment.

"Leeson," whispered Jang over the intercom. "Come to the ship."

I found him on the observatory level, sitting at a broad viewport, staring out at the steppe. He was armored, but his helmet sat beside him on a table.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said softly. "But I think something is happening. Maybe stone is coming in." A telescreen glowed with greenish pseudolight beside the port; visible in the screen was a subtle crawling motion, as if the moss were being disturbed by the passage of small creatures.

"Maybe," I said. I remembered the way the fragments of the dead giantess had wriggled away into the ground.

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Jang sat back with a sigh, and from the table picked up a pipe, which I hadn't noticed at first. I saw with a shock that it was the artifact possessed first by Flash and then by Irvane.

Jang struck a light, drew on the pipe, and the distinctive burning-brush scent of cannabis filled the air. Despite my condition, the scent awoke pleasant memories — other and better times.

Still the sight of the pipe made me anxious. "Is that wise?" I asked. "The pipe seems to attract violence."

"So do I," Jang said, smiling. "But though you're right to be concerned, it seemed an experiment worth making. I'm better equipped than you or Hu Moon to defend myself from whatever I summon up."

This seemed irrational to me, and I regarded Jang with doubt. He glanced at me and laughed briefly. "I know," he said. "But it's my nature to attack rather than defend, to initiate conflict on my own terms. I've taken precautions — extra stuttergun emplacements on all firing lanes, ankle-cutter graser net inside the perimeter. Hu Moon and Dueine are in the control room, ready to lift ship should that become prudent."

I became aware of a low vibration — the throb of the ship's engines idling, a sensation I hadn't felt in months. I felt a brief flash of resentment that I had not been included in the planning of this evening, but I supposed Hu Moon felt no obligation to keep the expedition's repairman informed. "Why did you ask me to come up?" I asked, somewhat sharply.

"If something happens, I want your confirmation," Jang said, putting down his pipe. "And I think something's going on now."

In the telescreen, a shape rose from the ground, man-shaped but taller than most men. Five meters away, a similar shape gathered itself together, indistinct in the green pseudolight.

Jang touched the dataslate on his wrist and a harsh white light flooded the ruins.

The warriors were beautiful to look at; even I thought so.

"Skelt fighters," Jang said. Later he would tell me that "skelts" were the meter-long blades that began at each warrior's elbows, attached by articulating swivels to the forearm, so that the handgrip, perpendicular to the sweep of the blade, could control the blade's angle of attack as it met a parry, or the body of an opponent.

One warrior was male, one female, their genders obvious through the

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light armor each wore. The male's armor seemed fashioned from a pale yellow metal; the female's armor had the gloss and depth of polished obsidian. Their faces were concealed beneath elaborate ceremonial helmets. The male warrior's helmet caricatured a simian face, twisted with dementia; the female's a carnivorous reptile, with needle teeth and a spiky crest.

The spotlights didn't seem to bother them. They turned toward the ship and performed elaborate salutes with their weapons. Jang stood beside me, his face paler then usual and tinged with an expression I could not decipher. It was clear that the salutes were for him.

For a long moment the two figures were absolutely still; then they sprang at each other, a whirl of glitter, their skelts moving with such speed that the human eye saw only the visual trails of the movements, a gossamer blossom of light around the combatants, delicate and shifting. Jang touched a button and a faint metallic singing came through the speakers, the sound of the blades sliding against each other. It seemed like faraway music, and in the rhythmic sound I could almost recognize a melody.

"They're very convincing," Jang said. A splash of hot sparks burst from the right shoulder of the male; evidently his opponent had penetrated his guard. He faltered, and the blossom of light changed, became thinner and smaller on his right side.

"He's lost," Jang said, and turned away, but I watched. A moment later he staggered as her skelt sank deeply into his armor at the base of his neck. The other blade drove into the other side of his neck and as she jerked her weapons free, his head toppled from his shoulders.

He remained on his feet for a moment, his own weapons dropping until their tips touched the ground. The headless body knelt, almost gracefully, then fell forward and shattered into a thousand wriggling fragments.

Later Jang told me about the ritual on his home world, using terms like honor and courage and principle...terms that I suspected meant entirely different things to him than they did to me. His face was unreadable but I saw a slight tremor in his hands as he spoke. "The skelt was our religion, Leeson." He shook his sleek head. "Steel made us holy and steel brought us low. The skelt decided our great questions for us, and

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there was always wisdom in the steel, or so it seemed. But over the centuries we changed, and the skelt became our politics as well as our religion and oracle."

"It doesn't sound so bad," I said. "If I understand you rightly, a politician on your world sometimes had to fight for his life. The process must have weeded out some of the sociopaths that infest the governments of other worlds."

"I suppose so. But it was corrupted, and became a bludgeon for enforcing class and status. The skelts are expensive to own and expensive to train with. What peasant or small merchant could ever challenge a lord, when that lord had been trained since early childhood in the use of the weapons? So we became a society of low-born assassins who struck from concealment, and bloodthirsty courtiers who accumulated power by collecting the heads of their enemies." He shook his head. "It became very bad." And then he told me about his world, the academies of war, the festive holidays marked by contests between great champions, the joyful years he had spent in the service of various masters. A kind of reverence suffused his hard features while he spoke, but the light eventually dimmed and he fell silent.

I was quiet for a while too, until my curiosity overcame caution. "I've never heard the story of why you left your home world," I said.

Jang smiled, his usual subtle twitch of the lips. "It's an old story, like yours. But different. I was challenged in an unavoidable way by a man whose death at my hands would have been a terrible disgrace. I could have killed him without effort but then I would have been destroyed as a man of my world."

"So you left?"

"Yes. It was the somewhat less dishonorable action. I traveled to Dilvermoon, I offered my skills to a mercenary recruiter there, and here I am, some years later, and I no longer recognize myself."

I tried to hear bitterness in his words, but it didn't seem to be there.

Jang looked out at the ruins and shut off the lights. "The show appears to be over for tonight," he said.

"I guess," I said. It occurred to me with sudden force that Jang admired the skelt fighters with an intensity that a man like me could not possibly understand. "Jang," I said cautiously. "Do you still own a set of skelts?"

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"Oh, yes," he said. "They hang in my pod, oiled and sharpened, next to my armor."

He took a generous pinch of cannabis from a pouch and poked it into the pipe, which seemed to look up at him with avid stone eyes. He lit the pipe with a fingertip torch and drew in the smoke.

"Leeson, do you know why I like this stuff so much?" he asked.

"No," I answered. I'd never felt any great affinity for the drug, which had seemed old-fashioned, even quaint, compared with all the ferociously distracting and gloriously bizarre pleasure drugs available to a moneyed citizen of Dilvermoon.

"It's a memory drug, you know." Jang gestured with the pipe. "But not old memory. It thins out the *new* memories crowding into your head from every sense, every thought, every impulse. It lets you see what you want to see with unclouded clarity, without distraction, if that's your choice. Useful in my profession."

"I suppose so," I said dubiously. "What if you concentrate on the wrong thoughts?" I thought about Flash and Irvane and their monsters.

Jang nodded. "Always a possibility," he said. "An overactive imagination might be a liability to a man in my business." He shook his head. "On the other hand, my business, in brief, is killing. I don't mean to speak in clichés, but isn't it true that death is the last mystery? Trillions have died; none have sent back reports. We still wonder what death might be, even now, when dying is a final choice and not a grim necessity, for most pangalac citizens. Surprising, isn't it...even when death has become a remote abstraction for most of us, religions promising life after death continue to bloom and spread and metastasize into newer and gaudier and ever more irrational forms." He laughed, a brief reluctant sound I'd never heard from him before.

"In any case, we who are close to death, who touch it with our hands...we often find ourselves distracted by poetry and mysticism. Thus the killer monk, the meditative slayer, the grandly mad murderer of fiction and history.

"But usually my imagination is limited to a kind of...theatrical paranoia. I feel armies coming for me, gorgeously cruel warriors hungry for my blood." He shook his sleek head. "Tonight I saw them rising from the stones, like soldiers born of dragon teeth."

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"Cadmus," I muttered. "Sowed the teeth himself."

"You're well educated," said Jang.

He tapped the ashes from his pipe and went away, leaving me to envy his imagination, despite its limitations.

THE FEMALE WARRIOR in the obsidian armor came to the ruins every night for a week, each time defeating a different opponent, until she was finally destroyed by a warrior in glossy crimson armor. His helmet depicted some insectile god with large compound eyes and saw-toothed mouth parts. After his victory he raised his head and bellowed his triumph to the moons, a shout with a buzzing inhuman undertone.

On the next night Jang went out to meet the crimson warrior, without a word to any of us, but for some reason he turned on the ship's alarms before he left.

The sound brought the survivors to the viewports in the ship's lounge, and we saw the whole thing.

Jang wore a suit of armor in an antique style, brown iron plate with dull blue lapis inlaid into the iron in jagged patterns.

He whirled his blades with what appeared to be great skill but he lived for only a few moments. The crimson warrior brushed aside his guard, almost casually, and an instant later, Jang's head fell backward from his shoulders. As I watched, I felt a surprisingly strong sense of loss, mixed with fear. Who would protect us now?

Hu Moon, who watched the brief combat from the port beside me, beat her fists against the thick crystal. "What a fool," she said.

In the morning we buried him well away from the site, so as not to contaminate the dig. Hu Moon at first talked about continuing the excavation, but several days passed and she stayed in her quarters with Dueine.

The skelt fighters continued their duels, but something had gone from the performances. There was an increasingly weary quality to the ritual, an almost palpable reluctance visible in the body language of the fighters.

I had the impression that they might soon stop, and turn to other matters.

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I occupied myself by watching the final days of the colony, as the ship decoded the last of the damaged data stack. There were many more burials recorded by the colony's historian, though his camera work grew ever more unsteady and perfunctory. I didn't see Suhaili the Pipemaker again; perhaps she had already died in the violence that was decimating the colony.

I caught only glimpses of the creatures who were destroying the colony — they seemed like the nightmares of an alien culture, which I suppose they were.

Many colonists died at the hands of creatures who looked like week-old corpses dug from moist graves, bloated faces shining with patches of blue-white decay. One entire family was torn to pieces by a pack of three-legged dwarves with feathered skins and cruel talons, while the camera watched, shaking so much that it was hard to see what was happening. There were beautiful succubi with long teeth, stony giants with white eyes, and a surprising variety of other monstrosities, all of which I took to be creatures from Jaworld's rich mythic tradition. I recognized some from my travels there — duppies, zombies, chickcharneys. It was hard to watch, even the quick glimpses of killing captured before the videographer fled, and sometimes I had to turn from the holotank. The colonists had wandered so far from Jaworld, and even separated by centuries from that home, they were still vulnerable to the horrors that flowered there. They apparently had few guns with which to defend themselves; most were armed only with agricultural implements like axes and mattocks and cane knives. It was slaughter.

In the evening after I left the ship, I would lie in my bed and wonder how long it took for a people to find new fears on new worlds.

When Hu Moon finally emerged from her quarters, she discovered that Jang, in accordance with his instructions from the insurer, had temporarily disabled the ship's main engines. We no longer had the option of leaving immediately.

She called a meeting that evening to explain. "It's a quarantine lockout," she said, pacing back and forth in the ship's lounge. "The idea, I suppose, is that in four standard months either we'll have resolved the situation or we'll all be dead and won't be able to lift the ship." She snorted. "Good from the liability viewpoint, but inconvenient. I'd leave

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tonight if I could. We've established every important detail regarding the colony's failure, we have an acceptable variety of artifacts, and the colony's datastack. No one would criticize us for quitting."

Dueine raised a tentative hand. "But, Moon, I still don't really understand what killed the colonists. Or what killed Irvane and Jang."

Hu Moon sighed and rolled her eyes, and Dueine noticed. Dull hurt clouded her usually clear young eyes. I spoke up. "I'm sure we don't know everything about the killers. But it seems we've attracted the attention of an imitative, predatory life-form." Hu Moon nodded at me, so I continued. "Apparently these creatures self-assemble out of small components, and they take on the shape of our dreams or maybe our fears. The colonists smoked a lot of cannabis, which probably made it worse, probably made their monsters even more vivid."

"Will we die?" Dueine asked. "I don't want to."

"No no," I said quickly. "I'm sure we'll be safe inside the perimeter. They know about the stutterguns." Besides, I thought, what could such a young and unformed person have to fear?

Hu Moon listened to this exchange with obvious impatience. "There's nothing so strange about this. There are many other chameleon species on the pangalac worlds," she said.

"True," I said. "But I seem to remember that most of them are limited to imitating actual physical objects."

Hu Moon made a dismissing gesture. "Doesn't matter. All we have to do is sit tight until Jang's engine lockout expires, and then we'll go. It'll give Dueine and me an opportunity to organize the logs and write the reports. It's not going to be so easy to make this look like a success."

She hurried out, with Dueine trailing miserably behind. I felt sorry for the young woman, who had obviously begun to serve as a focus for Hu Moon's irritation with the state of affairs.

Hu Moon and Dueine moved back into the ship, evidently believing that the ship was safer. I soon followed them; the solidity of the ship and its internal security systems were somehow comforting. I kept to my cabin during the day, listening to my small collection of music. Increasingly my thoughts turned to Suhaili the Pipemaker.

At night I tried to do Jang's job, since Hu Moon was simply hiding and hoping for the best. Days passed that I didn't see her or Dueine at all. Then

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we'd meet in a corridor or I'd see her in the lounge, picking up a bottle. She grew haggard, and lost some of her beauty.

I found a spare suit of servo armor, and began wearing it at night. It was awkward, but I felt a little safer as I walked the perimeter. I checked the guns and sensors every night, and I tried to think of ways to make the perimeter more secure. I considered asking Hu Moon to thaw out some icicle labor and have them stand sentry duty. A moment's thought convinced me that was a bad idea. The icicles weren't smart enough to be effective. More to the point, we really didn't need to find out what demons had driven them to their crimes.

Almost two weeks after Jang's death the dead scholars appeared. I hadn't seen Hu Moon more than a handful of times in those weeks. There were no more evening social occasions.

The monsters kept their distance but I found them oddly fascinating. Watching them at their inexplicable pursuits provided the only amusement available to me. I was lonely, and I finally understood how much Jang's distant friendship had meant to me.

At night there was always something going on in the ruins. Irvane's terrible goblins had returned to the site, and every evening they fought, battling each other with fists and teeth, with crude clubs, with swords fashioned of jagged stone chips embedded in limber sticks. These combats were mostly brief skirmishes. I had the feeling they were testing each other. But once two of them fought to the death, and the loser dissolved into the soil in a mass of wriggling stone worms

The first scholar appeared to be a somewhat frail elderly human, wearing a tweedy suit, in a fashion not seen in Dilvermoon for centuries. It tottered through the moonlit ruins in an unsteady path, leaning on a cane, with a look of almost convincing terror on its kindly face.

It approached me where I sat beside the perimeter.

"Young man," it quavered. "I seem to have gotten myself lost."

In other circumstances I might have been amused by this archaic mode of speech. "Young man"? I shifted my smart gun so it pointed at the creature.

It blinked large watery eyes. "Son? Is that a weapon you're aiming at me?"

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"Yes," I answered. "It is."

It laughed timidly. "You won't need that. I'm harmless. But I don't know where I am."

"You're on Graylin IV," I said. "How is it you don't know that?"

A passing twitch of some alien emotion crossed its face, so quickly I couldn't interpret it. "Are you in charge here, son?"

"No."

An unpleasant sharpness edged its voice. "Then I suggest you find your superior. Immediately."

I nodded. Even if I couldn't imagine a reason why a human should suddenly appear on this empty world, that didn't mean such a thing was impossible. My imagination, after all, was no longer good for much of anything.

"I'll fetch her," I said. In a moment of thoughtlessness, I attempted a courtesy. "Would you like to rest here?"

"How kind," it said. And it stepped across the perimeter, as if to sit down in the chair I had just vacated.

The stuttergun blew it into gravel. An instant later a shriek of dismay made me turn toward the ship. Hu Moon rushed from the lower egress, her hands raised in horror. She ran up to me and looked out at the place where the stuttergun had destroyed the scholar. "Oh no, no," she said, clutching her head with both hands. "We've killed V.S.P. Swin. Oh, this is terrible."

"Who? No," I said. "It was one of them. See, there's no body, the stone worms have already burrowed away."

Her eyes were rolling in a manner I had never expected from the ordinarily composed Hu Moon. "Are you sure?" she asked. "I know his face as well as my own. It was him, I saw him on the security monitors."

"I'm sure it wasn't human." I waved my hand at the ruins, where the other monsters went about their business, oblivious to the scholar's destruction. "Who are you talking about?"

"V.S.P. Swin! He discovered the tectonic machines on Meld. He's a god in pangalac archaeology. He revived the Single Point Diaspora theory of human expansion. A *god!*"

"You knew him?" I asked.

She blinked and put her hands down. "No, but I've seen every holodoc he ever made and he made a lot."

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"So you never met him?"

"Of course not," she said with a sneer, apparently trying to regain her dignity. "He died 700 standard years before I was born. But I would have given anything to speak with him. *He* could tell me what's going on here. On this terrible little world."

She hurried back into the ship, leaving me to wonder about her sanity.

By the time the next scholar appeared, two nights later, Hu Moon had given me explicit instructions regarding what she called "manifestations."

I was not to injure or provoke them, should they attempt communication. I was to carry a security camera at all times, so that she could personally evaluate any interaction I had with these manifestations. And I was to call her the instant any manifestation reminded me in any way of V.S.P. Swin.

Three nights later the next scholar staggered in through the moonlit ruins. It looked something like a plump, pink-haired woman in an out-of-fashion dress. It was drunk, apparently, its red face alight with carelessly concealed malice. Its features were surprisingly sharp in that round face. There was a curious pallor to its face, and a sense of transparency. Later I would realize that it was like looking at a malleable white marble bust cloaked with a thin layer of living skin.

"Oho, the gatekeeper," it shouted. It stopped, wobbling, a good meter short of the perimeter. Its gaze flicked up and down the line, marked by sensors glowing a faint red against the black soil. The movement of its head was inhumanly swift, and I wondered how anyone could mistake such a creature for a real person. "You planning to kill me, too?" it asked. "Like you did poor old Swin?"

I nodded politely. "I can't prevent the gun from firing, if a non-carbon-based life-form crosses the perimeter. Jang locked the security system into that mode, and only he could reset it."

"And you? Do you suspect me?" Its eyes were too sharp. "Why?"

"Well," I said. "To me, you're implausible."

"'Implausible?' What a learned word to come from the mouth of the lawn boy." It smiled condescendingly, but for some reason I was only amused.

"It seems like the appropriate word," I said. "For example, the

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satellite security web reports no other ships have touched down here since our arrival. In fact, no other ships have come within the system limits."

"Fah!" it said. "Are you so bereft of imagination you can't come up with an alternative?"

"Well, yes," I said. "I suppose that's my only advantage."

"Well, imagine we're part of an intellectual community set up here before you arrived. What then?"

"Is that your claim? Then consider Dr. Swin. Did you know he wasn't human?"

"*You* say he wasn't. Not me!"

I shrugged. "I saw the doctor's remnants turn to stone and wiggle away into the ground."

"Yes, we've noticed there's an extremely rapid decomposition cycle here on good old Graylin IV." It made a harsh sound, almost a bark, but then its mouth turned up at the corners and I understood that it was laughing.

"Ahhh...," it said, shaking its head. "Not easy to fool a moron, is it? Never mind, Leeson, you don't matter."

"How do you know who I am?" This was unpleasant, being named by a predator on an alien world. It made our situation seem particularly precarious.

"Doesn't matter," it said. "Go get the bosslady, young man. I need to talk to someone who's got enough imagination to believe in impossible things." It gave me another cruel glance. "That's almost everyone but you."

I would have killed it happily then, but Hu Moon was already running from the ship, armored and carrying a smartgun. I assumed she'd come to her senses and that we would question the creature together, learn as much about it as possible, and then destroy it.

"Maidan O'Binion," Hu Moon said, in awestruck tones. "It's really you?"

"Yes, dear. It's me, and I'm delighted to be here," it said briskly.

"Well, please," Hu Moon said breathlessly. "Come in, sit down. I'm so glad to finally meet you."

It shook its head. "No, dear, I'm afraid I can't. Your little janitor tells me the ship's security will blow up anyone who comes into the perimeter,

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if they're not part of the original crew. Inconvenient, but we'll have to have our little conference right here. But do send the janitor away; his face is too leaden to bear."

"Go back to the ship," Hu Moon ordered.

I was astonished. "It's one of them! Can't you tell?" I said in fairly shrill tones. "It'll kill you if you give it the chance. This is another of your heroes, isn't it? Another one that's been dead a few hundred years? Ask it how it got here."

The creature laughed again. "Dear lad, have you never heard of cloning? Of experiential transfers? Of private lazarus havens?" It winked at me.

Hu Moon turned to me. I couldn't see her face behind the visor of her armor, but her voice was flat. "Back to the ship."

I went away. I had the security video. If she survived her encounter with the creature, I would show it to her.

But when she returned to the ship at daybreak, her face was exalted and she refused to look at the recording.

"You might be right," she said. "At the moment, I don't care. She stays on her side of the line; I stay on mine. I'm armed and armored. What can happen?"

"Ask Jang," I said.

She made a petulant face. "That was obviously different. Maidan didn't have a sword, or even a dagger."

"Maybe it doesn't need it."

"Yes, maybe she plans to talk me to death." Her tone was sarcastic. "I don't care. I've been going crazy, locked up in my cabin with Dueine and no one to talk with."

I didn't know how to respond.

"It's really none of your business, Leeson," she said. "It's a risk I'm willing to take. I mean, Maidan O'Binion! The greatest cultural anthropologist of the last two millennia. When I was talking to her, it was like a blinding light. I've never had a conversation like that. I've been so *bored!* Oh, it's so good to talk to someone with an actual brain. I won't give that up."

A moment later I noticed Dueine standing in the doorway, head bowed fearfully, hands clasped together tightly under her breasts, a posture that suggested she'd been listening for a while.

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Hu Moon turned and saw her, but offered no apology or explanation. When she turned back to me, her eyes were hard. "Stay off the perimeter, until further notice. In fact, I want you to stay in the ship. Maidan told me she'd return tonight with some of her friends. I don't trust you to act reasonably."

I nodded. "You're the bosslady," I said.

She looked at me sharply, but said no more.

THREE OF THE CREATURES returned to the perimeter that night, and I watched from the ship as Hu Moon went out to meet them. She stayed with them until dawn, all of them talking animatedly. All of them full of large gestures, wide smiles beaming at each other, very collegial, as though they were meeting over coffee and pastry in the senior teacher's lounge. But beyond them, in the ruins, two skelt fighters moved through a stately ritual, and I occasionally glimpsed one of Irvane's frightening children, slipping quickly through the broken stones.

Hu Moon removed her helmet and set her gun aside early in the evening, though she kept to her side of the security line.

She returned to the ship as the dim brown light began to paint the ruins. I went down to meet her.

"They could have killed you easily," I said as she walked slowly into the lower egress bay.

Her eyes were dreamy, her face a little flushed, as though with a pleasant excitement. She stripped off her armor and hung it in a security locker, without looking at me. When it became obvious that she had nothing to say, I went back to my quarters, there to doze through the day.

Every night additional dead scholars showed up, until there were more than twenty creatures attending Hu Moon. They resembled men and women of past eras, dressed in garments that had been out of style for centuries in the pangalac urban worlds. They stood around in knots, talking to each other. The largest clump always formed across the perimeter from Hu Moon, who spoke with as much animation as any of the others. If they'd had glasses to hold, and plastic plates with toothpick food, the gathering might have been mistaken for a faculty cocktail party.

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Maybe not. Watching, I thought I detected a kind of hungry watchfulness among the dead scholars who were not at that moment speaking to Hu Moon, as if their conversations were nothing more than window-dressing. I have no imagination, as I've mentioned so many times, at such tedious length. So perhaps this perception was accurate.

The scholars drifted away as the dawn approached, and I could see Hu Moon making gestures of entreaty as the last of them left. When she came in, she was exhausted but feverishly happy; she spoke to me as little as possible, but she was polite. She continued to shake her head at my concerns.

"Don't care, Leeson." She smiled. "They may be monsters. People certainly called them monsters. People were jealous. Brilliant people get that a lot."

"But," I said. "If they're not real, then they're just you. You're just talking to yourself."

"Then I'm better company than I ever knew," she said, and would hear no more.

After a few days, Hu Moon moved Dueine out of the quarters they'd shared since the expedition's beginning, and into my cabin. Hu Moon reassigned me to Jang's small utilitarian cabin. I wasn't unhappy with this move, because now I had immediate access to Jang's video surveillance of the site, using a holobank that took up one entire wall of the sleeping cubicle. I could watch the creatures in the ruins without risk.

This rapidly lost its appeal. The brutality of the life there grew much worse at close range. I began to see the goblins kill the dead scholars, a particularly ugly sight, since the scholars could put up no effective resistance. Worse yet, the goblins took their time disassembling their victims. The scholars screamed in an entirely human manner and looked like human beings inside; I saw blood and entrails and bone. The illusion was maintained until the creature died, at which point the body parts melted into a homogenous mass of white stone that frothed away into the ground.

I helped Dueine carry her few things to her new home. Tears spilled silently down her cheeks as we moved through the ship's corridors, but I could think of no comforting words.

After we'd put her things down on the bed, Dueine turned to me, still

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sniffling. "I don't understand what's going on with Moon. How can she be so...*involved*...with those creatures? Why doesn't she see what they are?"

I shook my head and edged toward the door. "People see what they want to see, sometimes," I said.

Dueine sobbed. "I never thought she'd do such a thing," she said, waving her hands, a gesture that seemed to take in both her tear-stained face and the little cabin.

"People are unpredictable," I muttered as I left.

"Not you," Dueine said, somewhat unkindly. I guess I knew what she meant, but I think she was wrong.

When one night, Hu Moon did not put on her armor, and left her gun in the ship, I suspected her death was near. But the creatures did not seize her immediately, as I had assumed they would. Maybe they were more intelligent than I'd thought. If they'd crossed the perimeter boundary to take her, the guns might have destroyed at least a few of them. In any case, they continued to meet her at the perimeter, and she continued to be entranced by them, for the next three nights.

On that night, when she went out, Dueine followed her. I watched the young woman go with no particular sense of foreboding. Still, Dueine was not wearing armor, and I had undertaken to fulfill as best I could Jang's security obligations. So I put on my own shell, took my smartgun and went after her.

I was too late to do anything useful. As I came from the ship, I could see the two women in their silvery shipsuits, silhouetted against the dark mass of the crowd. They appeared to be arguing vehemently. There was much arm-waving and foot-stamping. I quickened my pace, but it happened before I could reach them.

Just as I approached the perimeter Hu Moon stepped across the line, throwing her arms around two of the creatures, as if in joyful greeting. They urged her away from the line, while other scholars closed ranks tightly around her. A murmur of conversation rose higher and now it sounded like the buzzing of insects. My view was obscured, but evidently Hu Moon sensed some wrongness and began to struggle. Perhaps she felt stone under her arms rather than aging human flesh. I saw her try to push the creatures away, to no effect at all.

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Dueine very foolishly ran after her. I shouted, "No!" but she didn't listen.

The goblins burst from the ground like reanimated corpses in some old horror drama. They seized Dueine by the arms and legs and hair, and she had hardly time to scream once before they pulled her into pieces.

Shock slowed me, but I finally got the smartgun up and pulled the trigger. My first burst caught several of the ones who had killed her. As they shattered, they dropped the pieces of her body they clutched, but others took them up and darted away. In an instant, the ground was empty except for Dueine's torso, still pulsing blood, a shining black pool in the security lights. The smartgun was still bucking in my hands and I forced myself to release the trigger.

Hu Moon began to scream. I turned to see her, still surrounded by the crowd of dead scholars, struggling ineffectually with them. They'd taken her to a spot of soft soil, a filled-in test excavation. So many creatures clustered around her that I could see her only occasionally, but she seemed to be slowly sinking into the ground. I suddenly understood that the creatures were taking her down into the soil, fingers pulling back the dirt and working her down slowly into its grip. I wondered if other creatures were down in the soil, pulling at her flesh; her screams now had a terrible fearful edge. I tried to shoot but the smartgun was silent, evidently unwilling to fire in the direction of a living crew member.

Before I could decide if I were brave enough to leave the perimeter, Hu Moon's face slid beneath the soil and her screams stopped.

The creatures melted after her in tumbling haste and were gone before I could pull the trigger.

I stood guard over Dueine's meager remains until daybreak. As the surviving member of the original expedition, I now had direct access to the ship's information systems. I read Dueine's will. She had specified cremation, so without any formality, I put her body into the ship's mass converter.

If the ship ever lifts again, her atoms will be scattered among the stars. I hoped she might find this acceptable. She was the only expedition member besides Jang who treated me with kindness.

After Hu Moon's ambiguous disappearance and Dueine's death, I spent more time sitting by the perimeter in the evening, watching the

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goblins and warriors at their inexplicable activities. One night a goblin came up to the perimeter and sat on a stone no more than two meters from me. It seemed to be wearing a hat made of human skin, poorly tanned. I couldn't tell which of my former companions had contributed the basic material of the hat, though it didn't seem to bear Hu Moon's distinctive tattoos. My first impulse was to bring up the gun I always carried and destroy the thing.

But I didn't, partly because its face seemed a bit less malignant than the faces I remembered from other nights. It still had that intensely *knowing* look, but the tiny features were almost human now.

"Yes, we've changed," it said in quietly conversational tones. Its voice was an odd synthesis of Irvane's and Dueine's; it spoke the same Dilvermoon dialect that we had used on the ship. I was as surprised as I would have been had the ground suddenly spoken. The goblin shook its head ruefully. "I'm ruined, by my lights. Took in too much weakness. An impulse that didn't pay off, killing the unformed one. She gave us nothing but softness."

"Who?" I asked, as if this made perfect sense.

"The young woman, Dueine. There was nothing to her. We are diluted." It sighed. "So we will die."

I could think of nothing to say, though my fear of the creature had subsided, and curiosity gripped me.

"And I'm curious about you," it said.

Apparently it was completely at home in my mind. My skin crawled. "About me?" I said. "What could be interesting about me?"

It smiled, showing small white teeth. "You are different. Give me the phrase...yes...'terra incognita.'

"An unformed shape, a blank slate. We can't see the meaning of your dreams, Leeson. If you have any."

"No?" It was still a shock to hear my name from the mouth of such a dreadful creature

"No. So, what manner of being are you?" it asked politely.

"Just a man," I said, though what I thought was: *but once I was an artist.*

That's what I was always thinking. Some people hear music playing in their heads. I hear that terrible regretful phrase...once I was an artist.

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"An artist, eh?" It leaned toward me. "Tell me about artists."

I considered responding on the most concrete level — some artists daub color onto substrates, some chisel stone, some make sounds, some tell stories.

But I attempted a higher level of abstraction. "Artists make new things from within." I shrugged. "Difficult, perhaps, to explain."

"Not at all," it said smoothly. "We too are artists of a sort, except that our creations are derived from others."

"So, what manner of creature are you?" I asked.

It shrugged. "You know the basics. We take our forms from your imaginings."

"Irvane imagined you?"

"That was my beginning, this time. Sad sad that we took the girl. So soft. Our enemies will smell it on us and destroy us all." Its face sagged into despairing lines. "And no help from you. No one would eat such a blankness as you. Instant cessation, that would be."

An idea was coming to me, slowly. "You want only the dreadful forms? Never the beautiful ones?"

"You're understanding now," it said, approvingly. "It's our nature to take terrible shapes, to struggle with our generation, to pit our monstrousnesses against one another, until only the strongest and most cruel is left."

I shook my head. "You'll all die but one?" I suppose it was my loneliness that made it seem as though I spoke with a real person.

"Of this cluster, only one will survive, when all is done." It straightened its leathery hat. "But perhaps then one of the old ones will come out from under the mountains, and eat me."

"You think you'll be the survivor?" I was fascinated. It was as Jang had said, it was like being in a fairy tale, one in which an evil troll sat beside me and said wonderfully strange things. For the moment I almost forgot Irvane's ravaged body and the way Dueine had come apart in their hands.

It sighed. "No, no. Not really. I spoke from simple bravado. The girl's softness...it has finished me."

A time passed and we watched a pair of skelt fighters standing in the light of the moons. They seemed in no great hurry to address each other.

The goblin snarled soundlessly at them, its small soft lips wrinkling

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back. "One of them will live to the end. We cannot stand against them. The tattooed woman's own are thinkers, not fighters, and we kill them easily when we catch them. You'll have no issue, Leeson, since you have a broken mind. Soon I will be gone back, no more to feel the moonlight on my face."

"Gone back to what?" I asked.

"Gone back to the soil in tatters. The cool soil. All my brothers and sisters," it answered sadly. "Someday perhaps to live again, when next we have visitors."

I was curious. "Is that where you go when the sun rises?"

"Yes, yes, into the ground or the caves. The caves are good because we remain active and can work at our schemes for dominance, but the ground is comforting, all that cool soil pressing against me, motionless. At peace." The goblin's tiny face melted with pleasant recall, or so it seemed.

"Who are the 'old ones'?" I wondered.

"Our successes. Our terminal forms. The product of our struggle. Yes, when they become too crafty to waste themselves against other old ones even more treacherous, they go under the mountains and hide. Once in a great while an old one will come out and attack another. More frequently they come forth and eat an incomplete cluster. Like this one." And the goblin made an expansive gesture with his long knotty arm, taking in the ruins where the monsters went about their business.

It looked at me, its bright wise eyes twinkling with malice. "I would kill you for the useless thing you are," it said cheerfully. "I could reach across the line and twist off your head, quick as picking an apple. But it would surely shorten my own life, such as it is."

I was conscious of wary relief. "Why?" I asked.

"You're a nothing, to us," it said. "No dreams worth stealing. You are completely safe. You could walk through the ruins naked and soaked with blood and nothing would touch you." It grinned at me. "Tell me what was done to you."

I rose from my seat and brought up my gun.

"Wait," it said. It raised both hands and I noticed that the fingers were inhumanly long. "I'll tell you one more story, then I'll leave you in peace.

"A wealthy family stopped to picnic here in the ruins once," it said.

"It was a disaster for the units that came upon them first. Not one of

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them, neither mother nor father nor baby, hated anything. Can you imagine? And what did they dream? The father sometimes dreamed of other women, though his primary affection was for the mother, whom he prized. Soon he was knee-deep in doting concubines. By an unfortunate coincidence, the mother was also an admirer of beautiful women. No conflict! The baby? Well cared for and content."

"What happened?"

"Oh, for many years they lived an idyllic life, the two of them and their lovers, and as the baby grew he found many good friends. Then the old one from the colony came out and took them all. Took their machines under the mountain for toys." The goblin shook its thick body. "That old one...oh, now, that's something you don't want to meet."

It rose and looked over its shoulder, where vague shapes drifted in through the broken walls. "I sense that it's time to hide," it said. "I want to live as long as I can."

"Wait," I said, an idea coming to me. "Are you saying that you don't always take violent shapes?"

"You have so many questions," it said. "Ask one more, if you like, and then I must go."

"Why do you kill your creators?" I asked. "Why not let them live? There must have been more to Irvane than you."

"Death is our mordant," it said. "We're transient without it; the death of our creators fixes us in our forms until we die ourselves. Don't your people have a saying that you can't be a man until your father is dead?" It giggled unpleasantly.

"Do your people have sayings of your own?" I wondered. "Or are you all just puppets, made from the imaginations of real persons?"

Anger knotted the tiny features. Its hands hooked into claws and it leaned toward me, startling me. My finger twitched on the trigger and the goblin was knocked back and shattered into fragments.

Its head remained intact for a moment, and it mouthed silent curses at me, until it suddenly sagged and melted into the ground, a tangle of squirming white shapes.

None of the creatures approached me again. But an idea stayed with me.

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I searched Jang's old cabin and found his stash of cannabis. I chose a pipe of living stone from the catalog of artifacts. I permanently disabled the ship's drive, in case I become disoriented when the nanomonitor in my brain starts to drift.

And to show my resolve.

I smoke now twice a night, primarily for the act's symbolic import, but I have convinced myself that I feel a very subtle change in myself. Perhaps it's only a twinge of hope. One evening I fell asleep sitting by the perimeter, amazingly enough, and had another dream of Suhaili. When I woke suddenly and looked about, I thought that the ground on the far side of the perimeter had shifted in some nearly indetectable manner.

Someday soon, I'll see the ground twitch, and white stone will move toward me. I believe this firmly.

I know I have to cleanse myself of all my hates, and all my bitterness. I have to remake myself, I have to learn to dream deep dreams again. Every afternoon, I watch the scenes from the colony's stack, with all the ugly parts removed, so that I can see the colonists living their quiet and beautiful lives. I've come to know many of the faces as well as if they belonged to living friends.

I've almost stopped watching the monsters at their play, though I occasionally look out to see if any new ones might have miraculously appeared. If that happens, I suppose I've made a mistake.

I spend a goodly amount of time maintaining the ship's security perimeter, lest an old one come to cut short my experiment.

Months may pass before they send a ship to investigate our disappearance. Years, perhaps. Many years.

I may be inviting madness and death, but since I cannot really imagine these things, the risk seems acceptable. I think of what I might gain, not what I might lose, because I have already lost everything that meant anything to me.

If I'm given enough time and enough grace, I might see Suhaili the Pipemaker and her people rise again from the stones.

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Gene Wolfe says that when he finished his new novel, Knight *(due out next year), he found himself with time again to write some short fiction. Here we bring you one sample of his recent burst of storytelling. It appeared first in the online magazine* The Infinite Matrix, *but we couldn't resist reprinting it.*

Under Hill

By Gene Wolfe

SIR BRADWEN, THAT FAMOUS paladin, had heard stories of the Hill of Glass in far-off Camelot. With Arthur's leave, he had ridden far and sailed perilous seas. For seventy days thereafter it seemed the tale fled even as he approached it, for at every village men pointed to the place where rose the Sun, and swore it was but two days journey more — or three. Or a fortnight.

And yet....

The tale gained substance at each new place. The size of the hill diminished. Likewise the difficulty of the lower slopes. It was not merely of glass, but of green glass of about the color of this leaf, sir. The princess, once only a beautiful lady from a remote country, gained a name: Apple Blossom. And when Sir Bradwen protested that neither he nor any other man in Christendom had heard of a lady so named, his informants merely shrugged, and declared that she ought to know — an argument he found difficult to refute.

At length he encountered a merchant, a solid no-nonsense trader in wool and fleeces, who declared that he had seen the glass hill himself, and

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even conversed with the princess. "A smallish woman," he continued, "with long black hair and big eyes. I prefer my women larger, and I like a bit more meat on them. But she's very pretty if you care for the type. Delicate, you know. One of those oval faces. Young, I would say. Very young, and stolen from far Cathay. Daughter of their king and all the rest. Think you can climb a hill of glass, Sir Bradwen?"

"By Saint Joseph!" Bradwen exclaimed, and raised his sword hand to attest the oath. "I have not come this far to fail."

"Well said." The merchant smiled as the point of his dagger carried half his chop to his mouth. "I like a young man of spirit."

"And he likes you," Bradwen declared. And then, seeing that the merchant expected to be asked for a loan, "I have gold sufficient for my modest needs, you understand. I've lands, and a castle that we wrenched from the Heathen Saxon. But in the matter of tidings I am poorer than any churl. May I ask how you came to speak with the princess?"

"With little difficulty," the merchant replied, clearly relieved, "for I have been blessed with good ears and a good, loud voice. She was on the battlements, where she appears to spend a good deal of her time. The slope of the lower levels is easy, and there are crevices in the glass with bushes sprouting out of them. It becomes steeper higher up, then levels off at the top." The merchant traced the outline of a bell with his hands.

"So I was able to get pretty close," he continued. "It's not a large castle, and the walls aren't terribly high. I asked her name and so forth. She's been enchanted, she says — a spell to replace her own tongue with ours. But anyone who rescues her can have her. The enchanter has promised her that.

"Let's see.... What else? Well, the gates are open. I saw they were. She has food in there, she says, and springs of water and wine. Princess Apple Blossom's her name, her father's King of Cathay — "

Sir Bradwen, who had heard these things before, nodded somewhat curtly.

"And she wants to be rescued," the merchant finished, not the least discomfited. "I told her I wasn't a rescuer, that I was a married man and would leave rescuing to the younger fellows, but that I would try to find a rescuer and send him to her."

"You have succeeded," Sir Bradwen declared.

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"I thought so." A draught of ale washed down the rest of the chop. "Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"Yes, indeed. I assumed she was locked in her castle. You say the gates are open. Why does she not walk through them?"

The merchant shrugged. "I can but speculate, though speculation feeds me well enough. It may be that she hopes for rescue, and prefers that to death. You see, my bold and knightly friend, with each step beyond the gate the slope grows steeper. Perhaps she might take ten steps, perhaps two. I don't know. But soon she would surely lose her footing, slip, and slide. The farther she slid the faster she would go. When she struck the stones and trees at the foot...." He shrugged again. "Suppose a kestrel, bold and young, were to fly full-tilt into a wall of stone. For that matter, suppose that you were to ride at such a wall as you would a foe in the lists."

Sir Bradwen nodded thoughtfully. "Then one has only to reach the summit of the hill to enter the castle."

"So it appeared to me," the merchant declared, "though I did not try it — or see anybody else try it either. Have you more questions?"

"One, certainly. How can I reach the hill?"

"Oh, there's no difficulty about that. It's but a day's ride. Go down the road tomorrow until you reach the ford of the Sart. Turn left. There's a path along the river."

Sir Bradwen nodded.

"Follow it. Keep your eyes to your left, away from the river. If the weather's fair, you'll have no difficulty at all. The glass flashes in the sunshine. If the day is dark, you're looking for a smooth, grass-green hill with a small castle of gray stone at its top."

The merchant paused to clear his throat. "Tell Her Highness I sent you, will you? I swore I'd send somebody, and I'd like her to know I kept my promise."

"I will," quoth Sir Bradwen, "and I will rise next morning before the sky grows gray."

Which he did, waking both the sleepy grooms and his charger, saddling the latter and riding forth while the morning star still gleamed above the eastern horizon, his good sword at his side, his lance in his hand, and another morning star (a weighty mace with a head of steel spikes) dangling from his saddlebow.

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"For if I find Princess Apple Blossom half so easily as that merchant said I might," he murmured to Saint Joseph, "I may climb her slippery hill and claim her by sunset. Assist me, and Joseph shall be our first-born son."

The sun was scarcely higher than the treetops when his road reached the ford of the Sart. To his left, narrow indeed but quite visible, stretched the path of which the merchant had spoken. Up it rode Sir Bradwen with a merry heart, and before tierce beheld a distant hill flashing in the sunshine. A little nearer, and he saw plainly that this dazzling hill was crowned with a small castle — scarcely more than diminutive keep — of gray stone. Nearer still, and his keen eyes made out a figure on the battlements, a maiden, he felt sure, with long dark hair.

A maiden who tottered forward and back, wringing her hand at every step.

Dismounting and dropping his reins on the ground, he took a certain wallet he had secured before leaving Albion from a saddlebag and applied the fine powder it contained to the soles of his boots.

For a time it sufficed. He negotiated the lower slopes with little difficulty and was quickly seen by the maiden on the battlement, who waved a many-colored scarf so fine that sunlight freely penetrated it, and called, "Hail, illustrious stranger! Greeting and welcome! Should you be desirous of cushioned rest, delectable refreshment, cooling airs, and the attentions a humble maid overjoyed by the lightest smile from her courageous and ever-compassionate lord, be aware that all are to be found in this lowly dwelling which, should you wish it, will at once become your own."

He waved in return. "I am Sir Bradwen of the Forest Tower, Your Highness. Your friend the merchant sent me as your rescuer, as I had been seeking you earlier. I have ridden hard all the way from Camelot. I am a knight of Arthur's table. Have you heard of us?"

He essayed another step, and finding it difficult indeed powdered his boot soles again.

"Your glory, goodly, most generous lord, reaches to the stars," replied the maiden on the battlement, "and now has attained even to my decayed dwelling, for I have seen you, radiant as the Sun and of clean and glorious visage."

At which point the knight came near to falling. "Your Highness," he

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called, "I can climb no nearer. This slope is too steep, and grows even steeper farther up. Do not lose hope. I will return with some better means of ascent."

Although the face of the princess was still distant, he saw her joy fade. "This inconsiderable person sympathizes most deeply with your plight," she called. "This bewildered and imprisoned maid had dared think it possible that her lord — that her l-lord...."

"I will!" he shouted, under his breath adding, "just not today."

There was a long silence between them, bridged only by desire. At last the princess called, "My lord, the wisest and most ingenious of men, has doubtless hit upon some sleight of noble simplicity by whose means this unexceptional person might regain her liberty?"

He shook his head.

"As, for example, harnessing a hundred wild geese to a sedan chair? This sleight was employed by the profound Lo Hi to pass over bandit-infested mountains."

"Unfortunately," called Sir Bradwen, "I have no sedan chair, Your Highness."

"Conceivably one might befriend the Storm Dragon, who would in magnanimity lift one up, even as the daring Sho Mee was borne among clouds to behold the Earth?"

"Should I meet the Storm Dragon," declared Sir Bradwen, "I will surely oblige him so long as the matter involves no virgins. I have never made his acquaintance, however. Nor have I the smallest notion where he might be found."

Silence reigned once again, until the princess ventured, "This least of all persons has the honor to claim membership in a family highly favored by the August Personage of Jade. She herself, a poor weak woman, has often laid her wretched petitions at the feet of the Queen of Heaven. Perhaps if you were to petition her exalted husband...?"

"Of course!" Sir Bradwen snapped his fingers. "I'll ask Saint Joseph. I should have thought of that at once."

With that brisk speed which optimism engenders, Sir Bradwen left the glass hill and returned to the village in which he had lodged the night before. There was no church there, but the villagers directed him to a chapel in the wood, not very distant. There he spent the afternoon and

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evening in prayer and retired, fasting, to the dubious shelter of a nearby bush.

Of horse and sword, mail and helm, no trace remained. Clad in the single simple garment of the poor, he stood at the entrance to the workshop. Inside that shop a patient craftsman labored, drilling holes and pounding pegs into them at measured intervals. Leaving off his work, he straightened up. And their eyes met.

In the village next day, he explained the contrivance he had been shown to an old peasant who knew some carpentry; the old peasant made a model of it: a peeled sapling, with twigs pushed into little holes along both its sides.

Later that same day, he and the old peasant showed the model to two young men he had selected. "Fell a tree," Sir Bradwen explained, "a straight, slender one with a lot of boughs. Cut off most of those completely, but leave the stubs of a few. You would have something like this."

They scratched, and nodded slowly.

"There can't be many trees with boughs all the way to the ground. I looked for some and couldn't find any. But we can drill holes and pound cut-off branches into them where we need them."

There was a lengthy silence, after which one muttered, "Ya."

"Old Lenz here will take care of the drilling and pounding. Your tasks will be choosing the trees, felling them, and getting into place."

One ventured, "Oxen we will need? It could be."

Sir Bradwen shook his head. "If you need an ox to move it, the tree's too big. Cut slender trees."

The old peasant added, "The top you cut where it lies. The branches you trim. Then it you move."

Both muttered, "Ya...."

"Work hard," Sir Bradwen said, "and I will pay you one lushberg *per day*, paid at the end of each day."

As he spoke he held up two lushbergen, and both young men exclaimed, "Ya!" To which the one with the cast in his eye added, "We work hard!"

Days passed. The first pole had brought him nearer the princess indeed, but carried him only to a point at which the glass hill rose steeper still. A second pole, lashed to the first at the top, provided a base from

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which they raised a third. That third brought him so near that for the first time he was able to appreciate the beauty and the marvelous delicacy of her countenance. His whole being throbbed with longing for her — even as the longing in her own eyes, and the tears, broke his heart.

"We must build a second triangle like to the first," he told the old peasant. "We can mount another ladder-stick on that, tie it to the one we've got up there already, and put a seventh on top of them. That should do it."

The old peasant nodded, his assistants mumbled, "Ya...," in unison, and the great new work was begun.

At two per night to the old peasant, and one each to his assistants, Sir Bradwen's store of lushbergen had begun to run short. He took to the highroad to refresh it, and had the good fortune to encounter a merchant the very first day.

"What ho, my bold knightly friend," quoth the merchant. "Have you rescued the princess?"

"My campaign is well begun," Sir Bradwen replied, "my troops advance even as we speak. We require, however, some small support from those well able to give it. May I count upon you for some trifling contribution?"

"Alas!" The merchant pulled a long face, an expression he had practiced and perfected. "My affairs go very ill. You spoke of a castle and lands when last we met. How I envied you, my bold knightly friend! For I have neither."

"Your contribution need not be large," Sir Bradwen explained. "A mere token of your support. What say you?"

The merchant sighed. "I cannot. I must buy wool with the few pence I yet retain, and if I cannot sell it at a profit I must starve."

"You appear remarkably well nourished at present," Sir Bradwen remarked.

"My difficulties, though very recent, are severe," the merchant declared. "Will you let me pass?"

"Alas!" Knowing that his own long face was wont to be interrupted by spasms of merriment, Sir Bradwen pulled down his visor instead. "Without a contribution, you may not pass this way. Doubtless there are other roads. There always are."

The merchant nodded. "There is one other. It is not as advantageous,

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however. It is longer, for one thing. For another, it has the ill luck to pass the castle of Gifflet le Fils de Do, lord of these lands. As a loyal freeman thereof, I should think myself obliged to report your obstruction of the more convenient route."

"I would enjoy the contest," Sir Bradwen replied with perfect sincerity, "but before we engaged, honesty would oblige me to mention that I do not obstruct it, only seek to collect a trifling toll. Also that I am authorized to do so by a visiting princess, the daughter of the King of Cathay. Perhaps honesty would also oblige me to report that you were well appraised of these matters, and to ask whether you had communicated them in making your complaint."

"O my bold and knightly friend!" the merchant replied. "We were truly friends only a fortnight ago. Is it not a shame that two Christians should thus be at daggers drawn?"

"It is," Sir Bradwen replied, taking his morning-star from his saddle-bow and testing one of its points against his fingertip. "I rarely employ my dagger while on horseback, however, and I reserve my sword — a noble weapon with an attested relic of Saint Joseph in the pommel — for those well born. For the rest I employ this."

So saying, he rode hard at the merchant; and when the latter raised his arm to block the expected blow, struck him with the lower edge of his shield, knocking him from his saddle. In a trice Sir Bradwen had dismounted as well, and seated himself upon the merchant's belly.

The merchant's dagger he swiftly snatched from the merchant's belt and flung into the bushes. The merchant's large and weighty purse he then decanted onto the ground before him, an act accompanied by much chinking and chiming.

When he had selected those coins he favored, he returned the remainder to the merchant's purse; and the merchant, when he had recovered from being sat upon by a powerful man in chain mail, and had ridden a safe distance along the road, was surprised to find that his gold was intact — only his brass lushbergen had been taken, with two Roman aeris, one denarius, and some other silver.

The great day came at last. Four overlapping triangles supported similar poles forming two triangles of their own. These (high up the glassy

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slope) supported another two which with the addition of a bottom pole to brace them formed the final triangle that raised high the final pole — the one triumphantly climbed by Sir Bradwen, the one he stepped from where the slope was gentle enough.

The one at the top of which Princess Apple Blossom met him, a perfect, dainty maiden a head and half shorter than he, perfumed and robed in magnificent brocade. The one at whose top they embraced and kissed, and kissed again and again. And yet again, until at last Sir Bradwen, fearing that he might be overwhelmed by his passion, suggested they go, saying, "If you cannot climb down, or hesitate to climb down for sweet modesty's sake, I will carry you down. I can hold you with one arm, and we will stand upon honest clay in a trice."

At this the princess smiled. "If my exalted lord will consent, this beggarly person retains a few poor possessions, and my all-wise lord must surely know that we miserable ones who have nothing greatly value what little we have. There is my inconsiderable jade figure of the Queen of Heaven, to whom I have no joss to burn though she is dear to me. There is my second-best gown, a contemptible thing in the eyes of every beholder, yet precious to me."

"I understand, Your Highness," quoth Sir Bradwen, "and shall have one of the men in my employ climb here and carry down these things."

The princess lowered her eyes in shame. "There is also my chop — my seal, perhaps? Has this humble one committed some risible error, my lord?"

"No, indeed."

"And the ivory sticks with which I feed myself, the gift of my gently nurturing mother. Would my lord consent to view the debased quarters to which this wretched prisoner has been for three long years confined?"

"Eagerly," Sir Bradwen replied, "if Your Highness will consent to show them to me."

"There is a magic box — "

She smiled again, and he felt his love deepen.

"Which may be opened only at certain times and behold! it is filled with rice and fruits. If it can be opened now, is it possible that the most gracious lordly rescuer would consent to sample its poor contents?"

"I would, Your Highness." Sir Bradwen bowed, for though he was

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eager to be gone he was far too well-bred to refuse the invitation of a princess.

Together they went into the castle, she tottering and half-supported by his hand and arm; and if their words were the stately ones of their time and their disparate homelands, their hands spoke a language much older: *I am a woman and you — you are a man!* whispered the tiny hand; and *I am a man and you are a woman indeed!* replied the great one.

Soon they stood before the box of which the princess had spoken, which was in fact a cabinet or locker set into one of the interior walls of her castle. She explained that the sun was now high — one of the times at which the box might be opened. She further described the food they might expect to find within it, and having received Sir Bradwen's courteous consent, she touched the latch.

At which the floor gave way beneath them, dropping nearly as fast as a falling stone. Together, she clutching him in terror, they descended into the hill of green glass.

THEIR FALL SLOWED, and at length it halted altogether. Soft green light bathed them; unguessable shapes surrounded them. "Welcome!" a small voice cried; and again, "Welcome!"

A very small man with a very small face in a very large head approached them riding in a silent and ugly little cart with invisible wheels.

"The unconscionable and tricksy person you see before you," whispered the princess, "is that very wicked magician who snatched me from the City of Peace."

Sir Bradwen bowed as he would have at Arthur's court. "Perhaps we meet as antagonists," he said politely, "yet I would much prefer to count among my friends a man so learned in all the ways of the Unseen World. You placed the lovely and royal lady at my side atop this mountain — "

"To find us a man of the Dark Ages who showed a glimmer of intelligence," the very small man in the cart replied. "She's done it, too, as I knew she would." He simpered, and seemed to be on the verge of laughter. "My name's 12BFW-CY-, by the way, and I come from the remote future."

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The knight bowed deeper still. "Sir Bradwen of the Forest Tower am I, and in larger sense of glorious Camelot. In a sense larger still, of Albion, the White Isle."

"This inconsiderable person," the princess said, "is called by the unattractive name of Apple Blossom. She has been torn, as may be known, from the Land of the Black-haired People, Kingdom of Ch'in, a country well governed by the most illustrious person whose light dazzles these inferior eyes, her father, here styled King of Far-Off Cathay."

12BFW-CY-'s smile broadened, becoming almost as wide as both the princess's thumbs. "You wish to return home, I'm sure. This knight has won you, though. He probably won't agree to it."

"On the contrary," Sir Bradwen declared, "if this lovely lady can be returned to her parents in safety, I could wish for no happier outcome. I declare her — " His voice wavered, and he paused to clear his throat. "I declare her free to go at once, and may God speed her on her way."

At this, the princess clung more tightly than ever. "This wr-wretched person, the m-m-most m-miserable of w-women, w-would — w-w-would...." She burst into tears.

With his free hand, Sir Bradwen patted her shoulder. "There, there. Do not weep, Your Highness. You will be in the arms of your royal mother almost before you know it. Do you have sisters?"

"She has five hundred and twenty-six," 12BFW-CY- put in somewhat dryly. "And six hundred and ten brothers. It was because she came of such an extensive family that we selected her — the removal of one very minor princess from so large a group is unlikely to result in historical — "

"I w-want to st-st-stay here!" wailed the unfortunate princess. "I w-w-want to be in *your* arms!"

Sir Bradwen's heart bounded like a stag. "Then you shall! As long as my hand can grasp a sword, no one shall take you from me. By good Saint Joseph I swear it! By the Holy Family! By my honor and my mother's grave!"

"Certainly not me," 12BFW-CY- remarked dryly. "I don't want her. As for your sword — " He tittered. "I am about to give you a more effectual weapon."

Sir Bradwen's eyebrows went up. "Do you mean a magic bow? An enchanted lance? Something of that kind?"

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12BFW-CY- tittered again. "Precisely. It will enable you to overcome the most powerful opponent without fighting him at all. A little background must be filled in first, I think. If you'll indulge me.

"Hem, hem! My companions — vile and selfish creatures with whom you would not wish to speak — and I represent a sizable fraction of humanity in the year thirty-two thousand three hundred and eleven. In another generation or two the human gene pool will be too small to support a viable race, even with all that genetic engineering can do for us, and humanity will be irrevocably doomed. Finished. Ended. Headed to be shredded, eh?"

"This fribbling person weeps," declared the princess with feeling.

To which Sir Bradwen added, "I'm not sure I understood everything you said, the bit about the magic pool especially, but it sounded very bad. If my sword can be of service to you, you need but ask."

"Oh, we don't mind." 12BFW-CY- waved an airy hand. "We don't mind at all. In a way we rather enjoy it. Our race has always been a filthy mess, you know, and we feel it's high time we gave the daisies a turn at the hupcontroller. Now I'll show you. Don't be afraid."

Sir Bradwen was sorely tempted, but said nothing.

"Here's what we've come up with, and very clever of us too, if I may say it. Of me, especially, which is why I get to talk to you two."

It was a short staff with a bulging, lusterless crystal at one end.

"I won't point it at you," 12BFW-CY- continued, "and if I did, I wouldn't turn it on. That would be too dangerous for *you*. But you may point it at other people, you see. It's thought-controlled, of course, just like my car. Point it, think of it working, and you'll see a crimson flash, very short."

Sir Bradwen nodded slowly.

"Suppose an enemy knight comes into view. He doesn't have to attack you. If you can see him, that's plenty. You merely have to point my paciforcer at him, and think of him being paciforced. He will be incapable of any violence whatsoever, from that moment on."

Softly and involuntarily, the princess moaned.

"Yes! Yes, yes!" 12BFW-CY- paused to clear his throat. But there's — hem, hem! — more. The same holds true for his descendants. Or at least for any conceived after ten days or so. No violence. None! Can't kill a

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chicken or bait a hook. And their own children will inherit the, er, tendency. If they have any. You appear troubled."

"I am," Sir Bradwen conceded. "You see, Sir Magician, many of my foes are Arthur's rebellious subjects. It is my task to return them to their loyalty, whether by killing them or by other means. With this...?"

"Paciforcer."

"With this paciforcer they will be of no use to Arthur even if they renounce their rebellion. Knights and nobles who will not smite the heathen have no value."

"Why worry?" 12BFW-CY- smiled. "In such cases you need not use it. But against the — ah?"

"Heathen."

"Heathen themselves.... Eh? Eh?"

"I hesitate — " Sir Bradwen began.

"Do not." 12BFW-CY- held out the paciforcer, and edging his cart nearer, actually forced it into Sir Bradwen's hand. "I must warn you that should you decline, this toothsome lady will be restored to her family. I shall be compelled to use the paciforcer myself. On both of you."

Sir Bradwen bowed. "In that case, I accept. No price is too great."

"Good. Good!"

Sir Bradwen's hand closed about the paciforcer.

And 12BFW-CY- released it with a sigh. "An infinity of pain and suffering is thus wiped away. Human history will be infinitely more peaceful. Shorter, of course. Much shorter. But delightfully peaceful. My own generation will never have been." For a moment he appeared radiantly happy. "We will have the oblivion we crave. Guard my paciforcer well. If it is not subjected to abuse, it will endure and continue to function for a thousand years."

"You may trust me," Sir Bradwen declared, "to do the right thing."

"Then go."

12BFW-CY- pointed down a long aisle between towering devices of sorcery, and suddenly Sir Bradwen beheld an opening at its termination and sunlight beyond the opening.

"Blessings are without meaning," 12BPW-CY- murmured, "and yet, and yet...."

"Farewell!" Sir Bradwen told him, and flourished the paciforcer.

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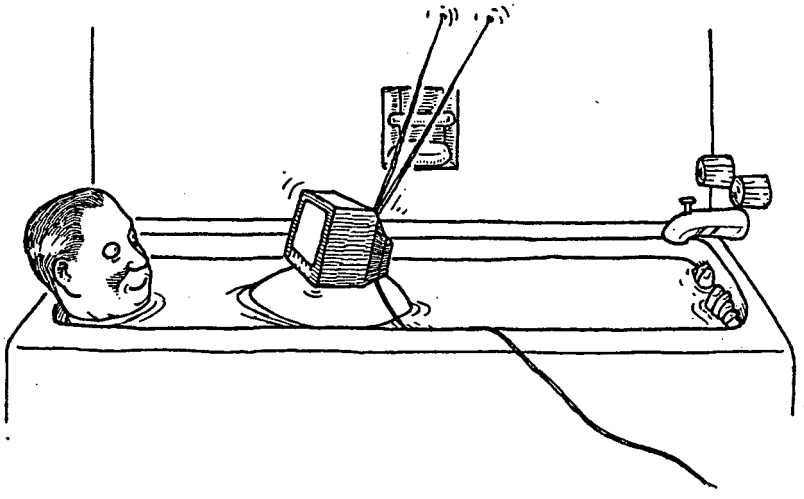
The princess bowed until her hair swept the floor. "This submissive person makes haste to remove her loathsome self from your august presence. Ten thousand blessings!"

NO SOONER HAD SHE and Sir Bradwen left the glass hill than its opening shut behind them. A pleasant walk of a quarter mile (over much of which he carried her) brought them to the old peasant and his helpers. Sir Bradwen gave each of them a full day's pay, though they had labored for less than half that.

That done, he lifted the princess into his great war-saddle and mounted behind her; and together they rode away until they reached the path beside the River Sart. There he took the paciforcer from his belt and flung it into the water.

And the two of them rode on, upon a great white charger who felt and shared their joy, the princess singing and Sir Bradwen whistling.



NATURAL SELECTION: YOU ARE THERE!

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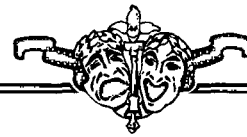

FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

GETTING INUIT

THE definition of "epic" that best applies to genre film is this: a complex story about simple characters that plays out over a span of many years. Certainly this definition applies well enough to the most well-known genre epics — *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* — as well as to an epic in the making, *The Matrix*. The personalities of Kubrick's scientists and astronauts are as bland and superficial as the corporate milieu they inhabit. Whatever behavioral subtleties Frodo and his pals might embody is obscured by the shadow of a Dark Menace, a situation that of necessity acts to simplify their responses. Ditto the Cyberchrist Neo and his rebel buds. And as for the characters born of what might be labeled George Lucas's emeritus period, "simple" must be considered something of a euphemism. It is a convention with much genre work in any medium that plot should be elevated above all other creative concerns, and the old dictum "plot is the resolution of character" should be discarded in favor of a lowbrow aesthetic that essentially demands character be reduced to the bare minimum so as not to interfere with the good stuff. As evidence of this, not so long ago I was shown a script treatment for a project currently in production, and one of the major selling points was the following: "This movie will contain no subplots and have no depth of characterization." At any rate, for whatever reason, complicated creations like those portrayed in epic mainstream films, characters like T. E. Lawrence and Zhivago and Bobby Corleone, don't appear to survive the genre cut.

Until recently, that is.

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Based on a thousand-year-old Inuit folktale concerning a hunter who escapes three assassins by fleeing naked across the Arctic ice, Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner*, the first full-length feature produced, written, and directed by Inuits, is a simple story involving complex characters, and though at one hundred and seventy-two minutes it may be too leisurely to play big in Omaha, it seems the kind of movie for which cinema might have been invented, offering a Shakespearean tale of greed, jealousy, and power, while at the same time providing a unique documentation of a strangely harmonious First Millennium culture that has remained virtually unknown to everyone except a handful of academics. Winner of the Caméra d'Or at Cannes, six Genies (the Canadian Oscars), and numerous other festival awards, *Atanarjuat* deserves every ounce of the praise it has received — not since *Lawrence of Arabia* has a film achieved such a unity of visual poetry (gritty *and* glorious) and sound and narrative. The screaming of the wind, the scrape of a sled's runners, the crunching of a hunter's tread, these crisp, bright noises perfectly complement the ice fields, snowy wastes, and tundra, all drenched in clear white Arctic light, delivering images of a dangerous and ferociously beautiful natural world that both frame and imbue with mythic potency the actions of the men and women whose passionate confusions and constant struggle to survive provide the film's kinetic energy. From the opening image of a hunter out on the ice surrounded by his whimpering dogs, all reacting to an off-camera terror, *Atanarjuat* is world-class storytelling, unhurried yet never slow, drawing the viewer in, immersing him in a culture that seems incomprehensible at first, utterly disconnected from our own, and then gradually revealing its mysteries to be merely familiar human ones that have been reinvigorated by means of this astonishing perspective.

The situation is this: An isolated clan of nomadic Inuits in a place called Igloolik (a town, by the way, that has been continuously inhabited for more than four thousand years) is visited by an evil sorcerer, who afflicts them with a curse that will ensure terrible bitterness and conflict. When the clan leader, Kumaglak, is murdered, the new chief, Sauri, endlessly humiliates his old rival, Tulimaq, forcing him and his family to survive on charity. But after the passage of

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twenty years, things take a turn. Tulimaq's sons, Amaqjuaq, the Strong One, and Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner (Natar Ungalaaq), become the clan's best hunters and their skill breeds jealously in the heart of Oki, Sauri's son. When Atanarjuat defeats Oki in a head-punching duel, thus winning Atuat (Sylvia Ivalu), Oki's intended, for his bride, the stage is set for vengeance and murder.

Urged on by his father and his perfidious, manipulative, Lady Macbeth-like sister Puja, a role marvelously realized by Lucy Tulugarjuk, Oki and two friends plot to murder the brothers and ambush them while they sleep, killing Amaqjuaq by spearing him through a collapsed tent. Atanarjuat, however, makes a miraculous escape and so begins the film's dramatic centerpiece, perhaps the most poignantly tense and beautifully paced chase sequence ever filmed, consisting not of explosions, pyrotechnic car crashes, derailments, fusillades of bullets, or flaming bodies, but of a naked man desperately running across the ice beneath the midnight sun, pursued by three hunters with spears. His feet torn and bleeding, half-frozen, Atanarjuat is hidden by a family living out on the ice, a family — we come to realize — of spirits who counsel him, supply magical assistance, and redirect his desire for blood onto a spiritual path, allowing him to plan and eventually to return to Igloolik, where he reclaims his family, carries out his own considerably more just brand of vengeance, and with the help of the spirit family, confronts the evil sorcerer.

To an audience accustomed to the grossly spectacular and traditional stupidities of genre film, to filmgoers concerned with whether Gandalf's dialogue played backwards constitutes Peter Jackson's erotic paean to Beelzebub or Madonna, *Atanarjuat* may not appear to qualify as a fantasy, since it engages its genre elements so casually, so off-handedly. Characters do not sit one another down and explain everything that is going on. Watching this film, you are plunged immediately and without explanation into the midst of a world of sputtering seal-fat lamps and raw meat feasts, of eerily lit igloos and grieving ceremonies and women with feline tattoos, a world in which sorcerers, magic, spirits, and reincarnation are taken for granted (Atuat is, for example, commonly believed to be the reincarnation of her own great-grandmother, and for

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this reason is called "Little Mother" by her grandmother). In a way, *Atanarjuat* is — in all its stunning and often grungy ethnographic detail — the antithesis of the ethnographic. Rather than offering analysis, the movie seems to rub itself against your skin, causing you to experience the Inuit culture rather than to gain an analytic comprehension of it, to have an almost physical appreciation for the hardship and peril that the nomads faced on a daily basis.

Every once in a while a movie happens along that seems to reconnect state-of-the-art filmmaking with the original excitement that came into the world with the birth of a truly modern art form, reminding us of the variety of purposes to which the agency of film can be harnessed. Despite its juvenile sensibility, *Star Wars* was such a film. Lost in the gibbering let's-all-get-dressed-up-like-Darth Vader enthusiasm that helped transform the franchise into the cinematic equivalent of Juicyfruit was a genuine amazement over the recognition of a new filmic range that was waiting to be explored. (Naturally, Hollywood chose to exploit rather than to explore it.) Though its story was derivative, cribbed from a Kurosawa period piece, the way the story was clothed, the new environments that were created in order to tell it, effected an expansion of film's basic vocabulary, both in terms of the technical and the imaginative. *Atanarjuat* will be seen by far fewer people and its influence on popular culture will doubtless be negligible. It's just not easy to imagine folks attending FastRunnerCons, buying Puja dolls, or rubbing their bodies with walrus grease, donning caribou skin parkas, and heading down to the multiplex for a midnight show where they parrot the Inuktitut dialogue *en masse*. But I think it may also be such a groundbreaking film, one that will have a greater influence on the art of filmmaking than *Star Wars* has had. Shot in Betacam digital video, enlarging the potentials of that medium, it succeeds in capturing a different reality with far more efficacy than Lucas achieved in creating his pixelated galactic empire, and in doing so it not only suggests an entire new realm of cinematic targets, but — by its wedding of the homemade and the epic — will very likely indicate to young filmmakers working outside the system that they need not limit themselves to unambitious comedies and coming-of-age stories, thus changing the face of contemporary cinema. It's

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interesting to note that Lucas's continuation of his *Star Wars* saga, *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*, movies that have been little more than ghastly ads for action figures and video games, were also shot in digital video. A case, it would appear, of The King Is Dead, Long Live the King.

Atanarjuat is by no means a perfect film. The 35 millimeter transfer is substandard, ten or fifteen minutes of cuts might have streamlined the movie to good effect, and the confusion of the opening scene will be off-putting to some viewers. Flawed or not, however, it must be considered a masterpiece. In terms of storytelling technique alone, the way Kunuk orchestrates his emotional scenes to arise from shots that evoke the constant labor essential to the survival of the nomads, women scraping fat from skin or pounding meat, men icing their sled runners, and so on...these frames create an utterly original narrative flavor. Except for the lead, Ungalaaq, the actors are all nonprofessional, yet their performances are without apparent artifice, unforced, and I do not mean this in the documentary sense — though these characters are recognizable in their ordinary humanity, we never feel that they are less than larger-than-life or that their story is other than vastly significant. There has been a spate of recent films utilizing nonprofessional actors, most notably Eduard Valli's *Himalaya*, but none have risen to this high level of competency. The script by Paul Apak Angilirq, who died during the production, skillfully blends the dramatic with the feeling of oral history, and the cinematography, as mentioned, is superb. But it is as a genre film that *Atanarjuat* makes its bones as a masterwork, demonstrating that the true power of fantasy is not to provide escape from the oppressiveness of reality — a drug, a goodnight kiss, or a decent meal can do that equally as well — but instead to amplify the real and allow us to perceive the magical-seeming underpinnings of our lives, to remind us of the miraculous nature of our existence and the infinite possibility that encloses us. In this, in its crossbreeding of *cinéma vérité* with magical realism, in its luminous depiction of human striving taken to the level of myth, *Atanarjuat* succeeds majestically, enduringly, and like no other movie before it.

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Jerry Oltion says he has always felt a kinship with W. C. Fields in large part because of the famous tribute given him by Leo C. Rosten: "Anyone who hates kids and dogs can't be all bad." Or was it "babies and dogs"? Tracking down some of these quotations can be vexing. Let's just say this story demonstrates once again Groucho Marx's wisdom in noting that "Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark too read."

The Unfamiliar

By Jerry Oltion

SHELBY WAS TRIMMING THE roses in front of his new house when the dog attacked. He didn't realize that's what it was doing at first. It was just a little mop of gray fur that bounced up and down with every shrill bark, and the way it lunged forward and darted back he couldn't tell whether it was coming or going. Only when Shelby saw the snout full of needle-sharp teeth sticking out from under all that hair did he know the dog was aimed at him.

He burst out laughing. That sent the dog into an even wilder frenzy, barking nonstop and leaping into the air as if it would rip out his throat if only it could reach that high.

"Hey," Shelby said. "Hey, cut it out. Go away." He brandished his pruning shears at it, but the dog merely danced out of range and kept barking. It had an annoying overtone to its voice, a high-pitched squeak that pierced the ears like feedback through a microphone.

Shelby stood up and looked over the low rose hedge. Nobody walked along the sidewalk. No cars moved down the street. Nobody else was out

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in their yards. So where had the dog come from? And how had it gotten into his yard anyway? There was a picket fence all along the front of the roses, and a gate at the walk. This little thing was too small to have jumped over.

"Come on, shut up," Shelby said, a bit more sternly now. "Go home." He walked over and opened the gate for it.

The dog stood its ground and barked.

Shelby aimed a little kick at it, not even intending to hit it, just scare it off. But it growled a surprisingly deep growl, and its fur fluffed out until it looked twice as big as before.

"Whoa, take it easy." Shelby backed up a step. How had it done that? It actually seemed bigger, and much more ferocious than before. He watched in amazement as it shrank back down now that he wasn't threatening it anymore. Its voice even rose in pitch again.

He bent down cautiously and tried the opposite approach. Somewhat timidly now, he stretched out his hand toward it and said, "Calm down already. Nobody's going to hurt you. Let's see if you've got a tag, okay?"

The dog barked a few more times, but Shelby kept his hand outstretched and it finally stopped. It edged forward, sniffed his finger, then jumped back and barked some more.

"Oh, for crying out loud." Shelby twitched his fingers as if he might have a treat for it. He wasn't much of a dog person; he had no idea if that would really work, but it was apparently the right thing to do. The dog came forward to sniff again, and this time it let him touch it, then scratch behind its ears. Its hair was soft, and its body felt warm when he got down to actual skin. Something — an air molecule on the nose, maybe — set it off again a moment later, but Shelby had already felt that it wasn't wearing a collar.

Well, once it got tired of barking at him it would probably find its own way home. Shelby decided to give it that opportunity, so he took his pruning shears inside the house, leaving the front gate open for the dog to exit through.

From the living room window he watched it trot around the yard, peeing on rose bushes, the ash tree, and the gatepost. He rattled the door when it hesitated in the open gateway, but instead of running off, it trotted up the walk and barked at the door.

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Shelby opened it and shouted, "Go away!" but the dog darted between his feet and pranced into the living room as if it lived there.

Maybe it did, Shelby thought. He had only owned the house for a week. The previous owner, a widow in her nineties, had died of old age, and her only living relative, a nephew who lived in France, had put the house up for sale through a local real estate agency without even coming to look at it.

It would be easy enough to find out if she had had a dog. The neighbors would know. The woman had apparently been a recluse, but something this yappy wouldn't be easy to miss even if she kept it inside most of the time.

Shelby watched it jump up on his couch. The real estate agent had auctioned off all the furniture that had been in the house — and all the woman's other possessions as well — but that didn't seem to affect the dog any. It turned around a couple of times and settled down on the right-hand cushion, looking more like a fuzzy pillow than a dog.

He'd been about to chase it out, but he supposed this was as good a place for it as any, at least until he figured out whose it was. It didn't look like it would do any harm on the couch. So he left it there and went over to the neighbors on his left. He hadn't met them yet, but they were usually home during the day, and today was no exception.

The husband, a big man in his sixties or so, answered the door. "Hi," he said. "You're the new guy. I'm Bill. Welcome to the neighborhood." He held out his right hand.

Shelby realized his hands were still scratched and dirty from pruning roses. "Uh...sorry," he said, holding up his right hand to show why he didn't shake. "I'm Shelby. I was out in my yard just now, and this dog came by. Little gray mop-dog. It seems to think it lives in my house. I was wondering if you knew who it belonged to."

The neighbor scratched his head through his white crewcut. "Gray mop-dog? Nope, don't remember seeing one of them around here. And I know Marlene didn't have a dog. Hang on a sec." He turned his head and shouted into the house, "Honey, you know anybody around here with a little gray dog?"

His wife, also white-haired and smiling, came to the door and said, "No, I don't."

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She proceeded to tell Shelby about every dog in the neighborhood, and from there she delved into the children, and she was well into the parents' lives before Shelby heard barking from inside his house and said, "Uh, sounds like maybe he wants out now. I'd better go."

He was too late. The dog had apparently gotten up from the couch the moment he left, because it would have needed all the time it had to trash out his living room so thoroughly. Books had been pulled from bookcases, chairs had been tipped over, the computer keyboard and mouse dangled off the edge of the table by their cords — and the ultimate insult waited right square in the middle of the carpet: a glistening pile of wet brown dog poop, amazingly large for such a small animal, and stinking up the entire room.

"Jesus H. Christ, dog!" Shelby shouted when he saw what it had done. "Out!" He kicked at it for real this time, caught it with the side of his foot, and scooted it toward the door. It growled its oddly ferocious growl and started to fluff up again, but Shelby reached over it and flung open the screen door, then booted it right on outside.

It stood on the step, barking frantically to get back in, but he slammed the screen and the main door as well. It kept on barking while he cleaned up the pile of turds. When he opened the back door to go toss them in the dumpster, the dog raced around the house and tried to get in that way, but Shelby snatched up a broom by the door and held it at bay while he disposed of its mess. He actually had to whack it on the head to make it back off enough for him to get into his house again. It swelled up to amazing proportions, and its menacing growl sent shivers up his spine.

He laughed, but it was a nervous laugh. Besieged by a lap dog! It would be hilarious if it weren't happening to him.

He spent the next half hour trying to ignore it while he cleaned up his living room. The dog barked for the first few minutes, then quieted down and scratched at the door a while, then just as Shelby was about to call the animal control center, it quit. He looked out the windows, careful not to show more of himself than he had to lest the dog see him and renew its efforts, but he couldn't see it anywhere.

He wondered if he should go outside and close the gate, but he decided to wait a while. The dog might still be in his yard, hiding next to the house or something. Shelby would give it plenty of time to get bored and wander

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off. Besides, the gate hadn't kept it out the first time. He'd have to go look for holes in the fence tomorrow.

The dog stayed quiet for a couple of hours, but after dark, when Shelby was just settling in for an evening's reading, it started barking again. He slapped his Stephen King novel down on the coffee table, went over to the bar between the living room and the kitchen where he kept the phone, and looked up the animal control center in the book. When he dialed their number, though, all he got was a recording. It was after business hours, try again tomorrow, in an emergency please call the veterinary hospital or the police.

He felt foolish calling the police about a barking dog. To heck with it; he could put up with it for one night and call the pound in the morning if it was still hanging around.

He sat back down in his living room and tried to read again, but the constant barking was so distracting he couldn't make sense of the words. He switched on the TV and watched a documentary on sharks, but even with the volume up he could hear the lunatic dog outside the whole time.

He was about to try earplugs when the dog burst into an even wilder frenzy of barking, and a few seconds later there was a timid knock on the door. He went to open it, and saw his white-haired neighbor, Bill, standing on the step, the dog nipping at his heels.

"You found out who owns it?" Shelby asked hopefully.

Bill shook his head. "Wish I had. I'm afraid I came over to ask if you could maybe let it in for the night. It's keeping the whole neighborhood awake."

"It tore up my living room last time I let it in," Shelby said.

"Hmm. Yeah. Well, I'd offer to take it, but Phyllis is allergic. We've got to do something, though."

Shelby thought it was pretty charitable of the guy to say "we," but it was pretty clear he meant "you" even so. The dog was, after all, barking on Shelby's doorstep.

"I guess I should call the cops," Shelby said.

"Cops? Hah!" said his neighbor. "You haven't lived here long, have you? Unless there's drugs involved or somebody's being murdered, you might as well forget the cops. They'll never show up for a barking dog."

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Shelby nodded. He'd figured as much. That was part of the reason why he hadn't called. It seemed so insignificant. He clearly had to do something, though. He could see faces in windows across the street as his other neighbors checked out the commotion in his yard. Great. He was going to get a reputation as a troublemaker right from the start.

There was no winning this one. Sighing, Shelby opened the door, and the dog shot inside and rushed into the middle of the living room, where it continued to bark, jumping up and down as it did.

"Thanks," Bill said, turning to go.

"Do me a favor and ask across the street before you go home, would you?" Shelby asked him. "See if somebody might have a visitor or something he belongs to."

Bill hesitated, clearly wishing he could just go home, but at last he nodded and said, "Sure, okay."

There, Shelby thought as he closed the door. At least more of the neighbors would learn the story and not blame him for the noise.

He turned to the dog, which stopped barking when it saw it had his attention. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that, little dog?"

It hung its head and whimpered, a comical gesture of appeasement except Shelby didn't believe for a second that there was enough brain in its head to entertain the concept.

"I guess you need a name," he told it. "Not that a name means I'm going to keep you, understand." He rubbed his chin, thinking, then said, "I think I'll call you 'Lunch.' Just so you won't get the wrong idea."

He supposed Lunch might need lunch itself, and probably water, too, especially if it had been lost long, so he went into the kitchen and got a cereal bowl, filled it from the tap, and set it on the floor. Lunch sniffed it, barked at it a time or two, then lapped at the water.

"I don't have any dog food," he told it. He opened the refrigerator and looked for something a dog might eat. Leftover pizza? Why not. He set a slice on a plate and microwaved it for a few seconds, then put it down on the floor. Lunch sniffed, barked, then turned away and went back into the living room.

"Fine," Shelby told it. "It'll be there when you get hungry. Cold and slimy, but it'll be there."

The dog trotted right to the couch and settled down on the same

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cushion it had curled up on before. Shelby watched it for a moment, waiting for it to go berserk and tear up his living room again, but it lowered its head to its paws and stared back at him from under its bushy brows.

Shelby backed away down the hall, keeping his eye on the dog until he got to the door to the spare bedroom. He hadn't moved much of his stuff into it yet; he hurriedly hauled what few boxes he had put in there back out again, then he spread newspaper all across the carpet and brought in the pizza and the water. The dog itself proved problematic, growling softly when Shelby reached for it, but he wasn't about to let it run loose in his house all night. He petted it for a minute, then gently picked it up and carried it into the bedroom.

It felt heavier than he'd expected. Maybe it wasn't all fur after all.

"Here you go," he told it. "Home for the night. If you need anything, don't bother to ask, okay?"

He set the dog down and quickly closed the door. It immediately started barking again, but he shouted through the door at it, "Shut up, dog, or I'll name you Midnight Snack."

That actually did the trick. It whimpered a time or two, and Shelby heard it walking around on the newspaper, but after a minute or so he heard a rustle and a thump as it settled down.

He tiptoed away to his own bedroom and got ready for bed himself.

OF COURSE IT WAS too good to last. In the middle of the night — Shelby reached groggily for the clock and saw that it was past two A.M. — he heard ferocious barking from the spare bedroom, barking that grew deeper in pitch with every breath, and then a loud crash and the sound of splintering wood.

"Dammit, dog, what now?" Shelby threw off the covers and stalked into the hall in his shorts, switched on the light — and stared in shock at the door that had been ripped to shreds. It had exploded outward, the bottom half of it forced right past the jamb by some incredible force. Pieces of veneer still swayed back and forth from whatever had done it.

The whatever had to be Lunch. Shelby heard its throaty growl coming from the living room now. He slipped back into his own bedroom, snatched up the baseball bat that he kept by his bed for protection, and

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walked cautiously down the hallway with it cocked back ready to swing.

"Lunch?" he called softly. "What's the matter, boy?"

"Call him off!" a panicked voice shouted. "Call him off!"

Shelby flipped on the living room light and saw a man dressed all in black, with a full-face stocking cap over his head, backed into the corner between the living room and the kitchen bar by —

He blinked a few times to make sure he was really seeing okay. The creature hardly resembled a dog. It had long gray hair all over its body, and it stood on four legs, but it was as big as a grizzly bear. Its jaws looked big enough to crack an elephant femur, and the creature looked eager to try them out on the man in black.

"Lunch?" Shelby asked again.

"Lunch, dinner, whatever you like. I'll even pick up the tab," the intruder said quickly. "Just call him off."

"That's his name," Shelby explained. Then, not expecting it to do any good, but because he had a strange man and an even stranger dog in his house and he felt the need to take command of the situation somehow, he said, "Heel, boy. Just hold him there."

Incredibly, Lunch backed up a step and growled again, deep in his massive throat.

Shelby kept his bat cocked back. He felt ridiculous standing there in his shorts with a slavering were-creature and a masked robber in his living room. Ridiculous and scared.

But not as scared as the other guy, whose eyes never left Lunch. He backed up a step. "I, um, I think I'll be going now."

"Oh no you don't. You just stay right there while I call the cops, and we'll — "

"The cops?" The man seemed even more startled by that than by Lunch.

"You bust into my house in the middle of the night, of course I'm going to call the cops. What did you expect?"

"I — " The man scratched his forehead through the right eyehole in his mask. "To tell you the truth, I was hoping to find the place empty. At the worst I thought I might find somebody new here, but I hoped I could do my business and be gone without waking 'em up. I sure as...well, I didn't expect to find her familiar still here."

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"Her familiar?" Shelby knew what a familiar was; he had just never dreamed they might actually exist. Or that he'd have one in his own house, holding an intruder at bay. But there was no arguing with a creature the size of the one that drooled messily on his floor right in front of him. Or with the guy in black, who carried a big knife in a scabbard at his waist, now that Shelby looked closer. Maybe old Lunch wasn't as bad to have around as he'd thought.

The man in black sighed and pulled off his face mask. He looked to be about forty, and very, very tired. "I should have known she wouldn't let it go even when she died. Damn, damn, damn. I'm screwed. You might as well just sic 'im on me and get it over with."

Lunch edged forward as if he liked that idea, but Shelby said, "Back. Screwed how? What's going on?"

"You really don't know?"

"All I know is that this dog showed up today and wouldn't go away. And now you're here. I assume that's more than just a coincidence."

"Probably. I wouldn't put it past her to keep some kind of snoop on me. Probably knew I was coming the moment I knew it myself."

Shelby was growing tired of standing there with his bat over his shoulder and asking dumb questions. "How about you just hand me that knife real gentle-like, and then tell me what this is all about," he said.

The man unsnapped the leather scabbard and withdrew the knife with two fingers, holding it out cautiously by the blade while Lunch growled at him. Lunch's voice sounded like a diesel locomotive in a tunnel now.

Shelby took the knife in his left hand, then stood back and lowered his bat. "Talk," he said.

The man swallowed. "It's a long story. I'm not exactly proud of it, either. I stole something of hers once. You know what a grimoire is?"

"Spellbook," Shelby said.

"Yeah. So you *do* know about this sort of thing."

"I've read about it," Shelby said. "I don't practice." He almost laughed. He'd never until tonight believed it was even possible.

"Neither do I. But the guy who hired me did. And so did the woman who used to live here. He wanted her grimoire. I got it for him, too. And she cursed me for it."

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"How?" asked Shelby. "What did she do to you?"

"She...you're going to think I'm nuts. Mind if I go ahead and show you?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Just pick up a book. You got one you don't particularly care about?"

Shelby narrowed his eyes. What was this guy going to do with it? He looked at his shelves full of books, books he never loaned out because he didn't want them to come back to him with broken spines or dog-eared pages. Then he saw the telephone book on the bar between the kitchen and the living room, just to the right of the intruder. That would do. And it was big enough and floppy enough that the guy couldn't use it for a weapon. "There," he said, pointing with the knife. "The phone book."

"Right." The man picked it up, opened it in the middle, and held it in his hands as if he were going to read it.

The two open pages burst into flame.

Lunch growled and lunged forward.

"Heel!" Shelby yelled, and the dog reluctantly backed off.

The man in black slapped the phone book closed, snuffing out the flames and spewing ash out in front of him, then set it back on the counter. "I can't read a book," he said. "The moment I open it up, the pages catch fire."

"Wow," Shelby said.

"Wow? I can't read a damned word and you say 'Wow'? Look, pal, I was in college when she laid this on me. That was twenty years ago. I was going to be a journalist. I heard about this occult group in town and thought I'd get a cool story out of it, and the next thing I know I'm flunking out. Couldn't keep a job 'cause I kept starting fires every time I'd try to read a manual, and even when I finally did find work that didn't require reading, I couldn't balance my checkbook. And forget reading for pleasure. If it weren't for billboards and books on tape I'd be a basket case."

"Sorry," Shelby said. He really was. The idea of not being able to read scared him more than anything else he'd seen that night. "So what were you hoping to do here? They auctioned off all her stuff before I got the house."

"I know. I bought the whole damned load of it. Bunch of crap, too. I spent the last three weeks going through all of it for the talisman that

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keeps the spell active, but it wasn't there. So I figured it had to be in the house."

"Is it?"

"I don't know. Your damned familiar nabbed me the minute I came in the window."

"Oh. Back off, Lunch." The slavering creature stepped backward, muscles rippling along its flanks and legs as it moved.

"Bear in mind that I'll turn him loose the moment you make a wrong move," Shelby told the man, sounding a good deal more confident than he felt, "but go ahead and look around."

The man sidled carefully around Lunch, looking at the living room. "The place was completely bare when you moved in?" he asked.

"Bare, and freshly painted. They even had the attic cleaned out and re-insulated, so there's nothing up there, either."

"It's got to be here, though. Maybe under the floor or in the walls, or..." his voice trailed off as he held his hands out in front of him, then slowly turned full circle. "I can feel it," he said. He stepped over to the bookcase beside the couch. "Here."

"No, that's mine."

"Behind it, then." He swept his hands around in a circle in front of the shelves, and said, "Oh yeah. They're tingling like mad right here. It's big." He waved his arms some more, slowly outlining a shape in the air. A five-pointed star.

"Pentagram," Shelby said.

"Sure looks like it. Here, help me move the bookcase."

Shelby hesitated. What if this guy was lying to him? He'd seen the pages in the phone book burst into flame, sure, but that didn't necessarily mean the rest of it was true.

Lunch growled, as if suddenly troubled by Shelby's doubts. There wasn't much arguing with *him*, at least. Something weird was definitely going on, and this guy had the best explanation Shelby had heard yet. He tossed the knife down the hallway to get it out of the way in case there was a struggle, and keeping the baseball bat, he walked over to the bookshelf and together he and the intruder wiggled it out from the wall.

"This is it," the guy said, running his hands over the blank white space. "She drew a pentagram here, and they just painted over it."

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"So what do we do to turn it off?" Shelby asked.

"I haven't got a clue."

Shelby turned to the dog. "Lunch?"

Lunch barked. A rottweiler would have wet itself, hearing it.

"Shush! The neighbors already hate me!" He turned back to the wall and said to the man in black, "Stand back."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, they talk about 'breaking a spell.' Let's see if it's a literal expression." Shelby swung the bat at the wall. He was appalled that he would even think of doing such a thing to his own house, but the night had grown so strange that smashing a wall seemed minor compared to what had already happened.

His whole arm vibrated when the bat hit, but a crack appeared in the pebbly surface. Shelby swung harder and knocked a chunk of plaster loose this time. A dark line ran through it. Three more swings, and he could see a couple legs of the pentagram. He smashed at them again and again until they were completely obliterated.

A crackling sound filled the air. Blue light flashed out from the wall, leaving afterimages in Shelby's eyes, and a howl like a jet engine shook the room. For a moment it seemed as if the house might actually lift off, but the shaking subsided and the howl slowly dropped in pitch as the source of the sound swirled up through the roof and out into the night.

Shelby lowered his bat. Too strange, too strange. But...

"Here," he said, picking a book at random from the case they had just moved and tossing it to the man. He opened it up, and Shelby saw he had picked *Firestarter*. Oops. But the book didn't burst into flame when the man looked at the pages.

"I can read it!" he said. "I can read it!"

"Go ahead and borrow it," Shelby told him. "But be sure you don't break the spine, and — "

The man set it down as if it had just grown fangs. "I'll, uh, I'll buy my own copy." He laughed a hysterical laugh. "By God, I'll march right into a bookstore and buy my own copy! Ha ha!" He turned toward the window, then looked back to Shelby. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't mention it," Shelby told him. "You want to use the door?"

"Oh. Sure. Look, I'll pay for the wall."

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"Forget it. Let's just scoot the shelf back over the hole and call it a night."

They did that, then the man left by the front door, still thanking Shelby profusely. Lunch had already begun to shrink again — the familiar was down to collie size now — but the man refrained from petting it on his way out.

Shelby closed the door behind him, then turned to watch the rest of the transformation back into a furry mop dog.

"Okay," he said. "I guess you were just doing your job, but now you can go back to wherever you came from. I don't think that guy will be back."

Lunch just jumped up and down and barked.

Shelby sat down on the couch and surveyed his house. The spare bedroom door was a total loss, and there was a pile of plaster fragments and dust around the base of the bookcase. Otherwise he had gotten off pretty easy for his first brush with magic. And apparently he had a familiar now, too.

He shook his head. It was really, really late. He didn't think he could sleep after all that had happened, but he leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes, and a few minutes later he proved himself wrong.

In the morning he saw that Lunch had been busy. Books lay scattered everywhere, Shelby's running shoes had been chewed to little plastic shreds, and another pile of dog turds lay in the middle of them all.

"Lunch!" Shelby yelled.

The dog skittered into the living room from the kitchen, a Chips Ahoy sack over its head.

Shelby laughed. But he got up and went to the kitchen divider, where he opened the phone book — thanking his luck that the scorched part was at the end of the white pages — and called the animal control center.

The woman who answered the phone promised to send someone right out, but when he gave her his address, she said, "Oh, that dog."

"You know it?"

"I heard it last night. I live just down the street from you." She laughed. "Don't worry; I'll find it a good home myself." Then she lowered her voice and said, "You're new to the neighborhood." It wasn't a question.

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"That's right," Shelby admitted.

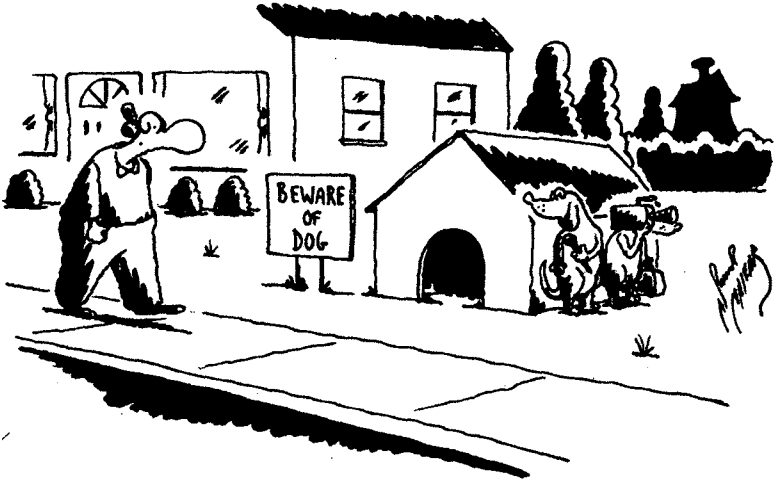
"Well, I'm throwing a party next Saturday for the rest of Marlene's...um...special interest group. Since you live in her house now, maybe you should come and meet us."

Shelby's heart thudded hard against his chest. He swallowed, then said, "Is there any more of her unfinished business that I should know about?"

His neighbor laughed again. "With Marlene, you never know. But if there is, we'll take care of it."

"Wonderful," Shelby said. "I mean, thank you. That would be good." He got her name and address, and promised to be there on Saturday. He was relieved to learn that they met at 7:00, not midnight.

After he hung up, he looked back at Lunch, who had managed to pull the cookie sack off and was looking at him with his head cocked to the side in the classically cute pose that little animals do so well. He looked so contrite that Shelby momentarily reconsidered keeping him, but only for a moment. Lunch might be cute, he might have helped Shelby to meet his neighbors, he might even be a supernatural guardian, but he was still a royal pain in the ass, and Shelby was not a dog person.



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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

MONSTER WEATHER

PAUL HAS just returned from two months at McMurdo station in Antarctica, a place as alien as you can get and still be on our planet.

"When I was standing beside the crater at the top of Mount Erebus, Antarctica's active volcano, I felt like a character in a science fiction movie," Paul reports. "I was completely encased in protective clothing, including goggles and mask — I might as well have been wearing a spacesuit. When I looked down into the volcanic crater, I saw a bubbling lava lake. Incandescent lava glowed through cracks in the black surface. The crater walls were covered with ice. Steaming fumaroles made tubes of ice that clung to the walls of the crater, each one big enough to swallow a person. I kept waiting for a giant extraterrestrial ice termite to crawl out of a tube."

Pat, on the other hand, is just back from a visit to the rain forest of Belize, an exotic jungle worthy of an Edgar Rice Burroughs novel. No giant ice termites there—but plenty of heat and howler monkeys and vampire bats, army ants and poisonous snakes and blood-sucking insects.

Extreme environments—from the overheated jungles of Burroughs to the ice planet Hoth in Star Wars—have long been a staple of science fiction. With that in mind, we decided to dedicate this column to exploring one aspect of these extreme environments — temperature extremes and how the human body experiences them.

A PHYSICIST'S VIEW OF LIFE AT THE EXTREMES

For Paul, staying warm was a matter of life or death. Standing on the crater rim of Mount Erebus, Paul had reason to remember the

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scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* where Luke Skywalker nearly freezes to death on the ice planet Hoth, surviving only by taking shelter in the warm entrails of a giant dead lizardlike Tauntaun.

On Mount Erebus, the temperature was -30° Celsius (-22°F) and the wind was blowing at 30 miles per hour. In these conditions, exposed flesh would freeze within five minutes. Of course, being a physicist, Paul noted that the real problem wasn't just the temperature. It was the heat flow.

In the jungle, Pat was never in real danger from the heat. The abundance of poisonous snakes was a problem, and the lack of beer at the research station was decidedly uncivilized, but the heat was not life threatening. Still, while Pat was trekking through the jungle, wearing long pants and a long-sleeved shirt to keep off ticks, dengue-fever-carrying mosquitoes, bot flies, and other vermin, she was pickling in her own sweat. And she had plenty of time to realize that the problem was not just the temperature. It was the heat flow.

In this column, we'll tell you a little about how your body experiences temperature, then talk about the pickiness of physicists and the difference between temperature and heat flow. Finally, we'll discuss wind chill and the heat index, both attempts to correlate environmental conditions with your body's experience of heat or cold.

Fooling Your Senses

Maybe you think that you can learn a lot about the temperature of an object just by touching it. If you believe that, consider the last time you stepped out of the shower onto a tile floor. Your bare feet probably felt chilled. If you had covered that same tile floor with a cotton bath mat, your feet would have felt just fine.

The tile and the bath mat are the same temperature. But the tile makes your feet feel cold and the bath mat doesn't. So what's the deal?

The temperature-sensitive nerve endings in your skin detect the difference between your inside body temperature and your outside skin temperature. When you touch something and your skin cools down, your temperature-sensitive nerves tell you that the object you are touching is cold.

But temperature alone does not determine whether your skin cools when you touch something. To cool your skin, an object must meet two

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conditions: it must be colder than your hand, and it must carry your body heat away.

That second condition is the tricky one. The tile floor and the bath mat are the same temperature. Though both are colder than your warm feet, they don't feel equally cold. That's because they carry heat away from your feet at different rates.

The cotton bath mat is an insulator, a poor conductor of heat. When you stand on the bath mat, heat flows from your bare feet to the bath mat and warms the cotton surface. Because this heat is not conducted away quickly, the surface of the bath mat soon becomes as warm as your feet. After this happens, little or no additional heat leaves your skin. Since there is no difference in temperature between the inside of your body and the outside of your skin, the temperature-sensitive nerves detect no difference in temperature and the bath mat feels warm.

Unlike the bath mat, the tile of the floor is a good conductor of heat. Heat flowing from your feet into the tile is conducted rapidly away. This leaves the surface of the tile and your skin surface relatively cool — and therefore the tile feels cold.

To feel even more dramatic proof of the fallibility of your temperature sensors, here's a simple experiment to try. Take three tall glasses. Fill one with hot tap water, one with ice and cold water and one with room-temperature water.

Grab the cold glass with one hand, completely encircling it with your palm. Grab the hot glass in the same way with the other hand. Hold both glasses for a full minute. After the minute is up, release those glasses and grab the room-temperature glass with both hands.

Weird! The hand that held the cold glass will report that you are holding a hot glass. The hand that held the hot glass will tell you that you are holding a cold glass. But both hands are holding the same glass!

Your contradictory sensations are a further indication that the thermal sensors in your hands do not sense temperature directly. These sensors sense temperature change caused by heat flowing into or out of your hands. When two objects are at different temperatures and in contact, heat flows from the hotter one to the cooler one. That's one way to tell which one is hotter.

In the experiment you just tried, heat flows from the room-temperature glass into the hand that was

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cooled by holding the cold glass. Heat flows into the room-temperature glass from the hand that was warmed by holding the hot glass. The hot hand is losing heat, so it senses that the glass is cold. The cold hand is gaining heat, so it senses that the glass is hot.

Getting to Know Flo

You may have noticed that we are talking a lot about heat flowing and not much about what heat is. That's Paul's doing.

Pat has noticed that physicists get peculiar and jumpy when they are talking to non-physicists about heat. Say something is hot, and a physicist will nod grudgingly. But say anything that implies that a hot object contains a lot of heat, and a physicist will look pained.

Paul says that to use the word "heat" correctly, you must always be able to add the word "flow" immediately after it. To a physicist, heat is a form of energy that transfers from one body to another. (Pat has responded to Paul's insistence by suggesting that we simply add a character named Flo (short for Florence) to any discussion of heat. As in "Turn up the heat, Flo!" This suggestion makes Paul laugh and look vaguely distressed simultaneously, and that, for Pat, makes it worthwhile.)

Annoying as the physicist's pickiness about heat may be, Pat agrees that this pickiness is understandable when you start mucking about trying to understand heat and temperature. Back in the 18th century people spent a lot of energy (and expelled a lot of hot air) trying to clarify the difference between heat, thermal energy, and temperature. They ended up concluding that heat is a form of energy that moves from one body to another. (That's the flow that Paul insists on.)

Thermal energy, on the other hand, is a form of energy contained within a body due to its temperature. And temperature is a measure of the energy per molecule contained in a body. A lot of energy can flow out of a coin at 0° Celsius into another coin at –200° Celsius. The energy available due to the temperature of the coin is the thermal energy contained in the coin.

Here's a comparison that may help you get a better understanding of heat, thermal energy, and temperature. Consider the wick of a burning candle and a thousand-ton iceberg floating off the coast of Antarctica. The burning wick is at a much higher temperature than the iceberg. But the thermal energy

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contained in the massive iceberg is much greater than the energy content of the tiny amount of hot gas of the candle flame. And as for heat (or if you prefer, heat flow), more heat flows from the warm atmosphere into the melting iceberg than flows out of the small candle flame into the atmosphere.

A Chilly Wind

So let's take this discussion from the theoretical to the practical. As Paul stood on the edge of the crater on Mount Erebus with the wind whipping around him, what mattered was not the quantitative measure of the temperature. What mattered was whether his flesh was going to freeze, a condition known as frostbite.

On Mount Erebus, Noel Wanner, another Exploratorium staffer on the expedition, took off his face mask to shoot video. In just minutes Noel's nose turned an inhuman shade of white, indicating the first stage of frostbite. Noel quickly covered his nose and cupped his gloved hands around it to warm it up again.

How long it takes for exposed flesh to freeze depends on how rapidly heat flows out of the flesh compared to how rapidly heat was carried into the flesh from inside the body. Heat loss from the body depends on both the air temperature and the wind. If you've ever felt comfortable on a cold day — then shivered when you were hit by a blast of wind—you know the cooling effect a wind can have. When the wind wasn't blowing, Paul reports that -30°C did not feel dangerously cold.

In an attempt to quantify the cooling effect of the wind, people use a table known as the wind chill index. You've probably heard weather forecasters talk about wind chill, saying something like, "The temperature is 5 below zero, but with the wind chill it will feel like 20 below, so bundle up." The idea is simple — the wind speeds up the loss of heat from your body, so the air temperature feels colder than it really is. When Noel removed his face mask on Mount Erebus, he inadvertently tested the predictions of the wind chill table.

Antarctic explorers Paul Siple and Charles Passel did the original work on wind chill in the winter of 1941. They exposed plastic cylinders of water to different temperatures and wind velocities and measured how long it took the water to freeze. From these measurements, Siple came up with the first wind chill tables.

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In 2000, the weather experts of the U.S. and Canada came together to revise Siple's wind chill table. They put volunteers into a wind tunnel that blew cold air onto their faces. Temperature sensors were attached to the faces of the volunteers and their core temperatures were measured by thermometers inserted into places where aliens who abduct humans are reputed to insert probes. This allowed researchers to quantify the heat flow out of human flesh and create a more accurate table. (You can find this table on the Web http://www.crh.noaa.gov/fsd/windchill.htm.)

Wind chill quantifies the cooling rate of human flesh. It is meaningless to inanimate objects like rocks and bicycles. If the temperature is -30°F and the wind is blowing at 40 mph, the wind-chill is -70°F, according to the new table. That means a human will lose heat as if it were a calm -70°F day. But it doesn't mean that your bicycle will act as it would in -70°F weather. The bicycle will cool off rapidly at first in the wind. But as the bicycle approaches -30°F, its heat loss will slow down and stop and its final temperature will be -30°F. Unheated objects come to the temperature of the environment. The wind chill just shortens the time it takes to reach the final temperature.

Heat and Humidity

When you get right down to it, the temperature that you feel isn't necessarily the same as the temperature that a thermometer measures. That's true in cold weather — like the windy top of Mount Erebus. It's also true in hot weather — like the sticky heat of the Belizian jungle.

You've probably heard that old weather cliché (usually drawled by someone who's too hot to move): "It's not the heat; it's the humidity." Paul points out that what people really mean to say is that "It's not the temperature; it's the humidity." Because it really is the heat, Flo.

You see, sweating is your body's way of cooling down. When water evaporates, it absorbs thermal energy from its surroundings and carries it away. When sweat evaporates from your skin, heat flows into the evaporating water and your skin gets cooler. This works just fine — unless the water doesn't evaporate.

A measurement that gives you some information on how rapidly the water will evaporate is relative

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humidity, which tells you how much water vapor is in the air compared to how much the air could hold at a given temperature. Relative humidity is usually given as a percentage. If the relative humidity is 80 percent, then the air contains 80 percent of the water vapor it could hold at that temperature.

The higher the relative humidity, the slower your sweat is to evaporate — and that's where the problem comes in. On a hot day, you sweat. If the relative humidity is high, the sweat doesn't evaporate.

Pat can testify that this is not pleasant. In this situation, you don't cool off. You feel the sweat clinging to your skin and you wish you had a cold beer and you know that the research lab doesn't have any and you think that this is just plain uncivilized and...but we digress. Let's just say that hot humid air makes it difficult for a body to produce a heat flow and keep a core temperature below 105°F.

The wind chill index is one attempt to establish the "apparent temperature," that is, the temperature you feel as opposed to the temperature measured by a thermometer. A similar measure named the heat index attempts to quantify discomfort at higher temperatures. (You can find the heat index at http://weather.noaa.gov/weather/hwave.html.)

Reality vs. Fiction

Paul and Pat both survived their extreme environments, emerging with no permanent damage. They find themselves with an increased appreciation for temperate climates — and an increased respect for temperature extremes.

When Paul describes the conditions at the top of Mount Erebus, where he spent several nights, it's easy to understand this respect. Seven scientists, one mountaineer, one science teacher, and two writers were crammed into a one-room building to eat and work. At night, each person went out alone to a one-person tent to sleep.

Paul remembers thinking that this was a perfect set-up for a horror movie. As someone who has watched these movies, he knows the secret to survival is simple: "Don't go out alone — the monsters will get you." In particular, he thought about the movie, *The Thing*, in which a group of Antarctic researchers thaw out an extraterrestrial they find frozen in the ice — with consequences that prove

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to be very unpleasant to anyone caught out alone.

In Paul's Antarctica, the situation was just as intense and just as frightening. But the monster wasn't an extraterrestrial alien. The monster was the weather.

To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at www.brazenhussies.net/murphy. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit www.exo.net/~pauld.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH WE HOPE to have the results of our reader survey to share with you. Preliminary investigations of the survey suggest that readers of this magazine are a sharp bunch who like to stretch their imaginations (no great shock there).

To aid you in that cause, we've got stories lined up like these two:

• "Anomalous Structures of My Dreams" by M. Shayne Bell, in which a very strange ailment causes alarm in Salt Lake City.

• "The Birds of Isla Mujeres" by Steven Popkes, a dreamlike vision of the Caribbean and an unusual man found there.

Our reader survey results suggest that *F&SF* readers enjoy discovering new writers, so keep your eyes open for Jeremy Minton, Al Michaud, and Aaron Reed, all of whom are set to debut here alongside veteran writers like M. Rickert, Alex Irvine, and James L. Cambias...and while we're bandying about names, perhaps these upcoming contributors will ring a bell with you also: Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Reed, Ursula Le Guin, and Jack Cady. The year 2003 looks to be a good one. Check out our Website at www.fsfmag.com for the latest info and for the easiest way to subscribe.

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If perchance, out of Mr. Goulart's many novels (most recent of which is Groucho Marx, Secret Agent, *a book to be read whilst wearing elephant's pajamas if ever there was one), you happened to read* The Prisoner of Blackwood Castle *or* The Curse of the Obelisk, *then you've encountered Harry Challenge before. The Victorian ghostbuster has also been seen recently in Marvin Kaye's anthology* The Ultimate Halloween. *Now he's in our pages with a case of a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't phantom.*

The Woman in the Mist

By Ron Goulart

IT WAS ON A RAW, WINDY afternoon in the spring of 1899 that Harry Challenge arrived in the capital city of the small Middle European country of Urbania. Before midnight he'd narrowly avoid being crushed by a falling gargoyle, be threatened by an international female spy, and almost hurled off a train by a jealous circus strongman. He'd initially gone there simply to investigate a ghost.

Harry had been in Paris quietly diverting himself after apprehending a notorious band of elite grave robbers in Lisbon, when a cablegram from New York City caught up with him.

Dear Son: Cease lollygagging in the fleshpots and hasten your dissipated carcass over to Urbania. Our client is Baron Westerman, who dwells in a castle a short train journey from St. Rolandsburg. This mutt thinks he's being haunted by his wife's ghost. Obviously we can take him for a bundle in fees. Your loving father, the Challenge International Detective Agency.

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Harry arrived at the huge, domed St. Rolandsburg Station at ten minutes after two in the afternoon. Within a few minutes more he and his single suitcase were inside a hansom cab heading for the opulent Hotel Pandora two miles away.

He'd been in Urbania twice before on agency cases and had long since decided that he liked it a good deal less than France.

He was a lean, clean-shaven man of thirty-two, a bit above middle height. He wore, since his father believed it helped the image of the detective agency, a conservative dark business suit and a bowler hat.

The gargoyle, an exceptionally ugly one, had been lurking atop St. Roland Cathedral for several centuries.

The cab rattled, then abruptly halted on the cobblestone street in front of the ancient towering cathedral.

Harry, who'd just lit one of the thin dark cigars he favored, glanced out the window. "This sure as hell isn't the hotel," he observed.

The door was politely tugged open by the driver. "Beg your pardon, sir, but one of the wheels is coming loose."

"And?"

The thin young man beckoned him to disembark. "If you'll but wait on the sidewalk, sir, I'll summon a new cab to convey — "

Harry gathered up his suitcase and climbed out. "The Hotel Pandora's less than a mile from here," he said. "Just across the bridge. I can walk there before you — "

"No, sir, my employers would be much angered if that happened." He took hold of Harry's arm, led him to the sidewalk and positioned him on a spot near the curb.

Harry set his suitcase down. "Even so, I'd rather hike."

"That would also reflect on me, sir. Here." He produced, from behind his back, a bright yellow shawl and draped it over Harry's shoulders. "This will protect you from the elements."

After taking a puff of his cigar, Harry said, "Okay, I'll wait a few minutes."

"I'm most appreciative, sir." The youthful cabman took a step back, studied Harry and then moved forward again. He took hold of both Harry's arms and moved him about a foot to the right. "A much more comfortable position, I believe." Nodding, he returned to his hansom and, standing

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near his roan horse, began scanning the busy thoroughfare for a replacement cab to flag down.

Harry took another puff of his cigar and glanced across the wide, cobblestone Cathedral Road toward the vast Prince Leopold Gardens. A slim young woman on a bicycle came riding out of the park along a tree-lined lane, the skirt of her checkered traveling suit nipped at by the harsh afternoon wind.

She suddenly stopped, waved her arms, and yelled, "Harry, look up!"

He did.

Then he dived to his left, losing the bright yellow scarf, and hit the sidewalk. He went rolling over the pavement, dropped off the curb and into the gutter.

The heavy stone gargoyle he'd seen plummeting down toward him from high up on the cathedral smacked into sidewalk on exactly the spot where he'd been standing. His suitcase was squashed flat. There was an immense smashing, crunching, and cracking, and dust came swirling up as jagged fragments of paving shot up all around.

There was noise all about. People shouting, crying out, carriages and cabs rattling to stops, horses whinnying. A dog barked over in the park.

Harry, feeling a mite wobbly, got to his feet. He brushed himself off swiftly and reached into his shoulder holster for his .38 revolver.

By that time his solicitous cabdriver was back atop the hansom, applying the whip to the roan horse.

Before Harry had the gun out, the cab was clattering away in the direction of the bridge.

"You're not exceptionally bright, Harry," said the pretty auburn-haired cyclist, who'd walked her bicycle through the halted traffic and was approaching Harry. "Quite obviously that lout positioned you there so you — "

"Thanks for the warning, Jennie." He took hold of the handlebars of her bike. "Wait here until I get back and then we'll exchange pleasantries."

"Surely you're not going after that fellow and giving him another chance to kill you?"

Grinning, Harry commandeered the bicycle, hopped onto the seat and went pedaling off in pursuit of the fleeing assistant assassin.

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* * *

Harry caught up with the swaying hansom cab midway across the ornate wrought-iron bridge spanning the gray choppy waters of the River Konig.

Increasing his speed, he pulled alongside and leaped free of the borrowed bicycle. He caught hold of the windowsill on the passenger door of the speeding cab.

Jennie Barr's cycle wobbled on riderless for a few yards more, then toppled over directly in the path of a heavy horse-drawn beer wagon.

As Harry pulled himself up onto the roof of the hansom, the young driver rose up on his outside seat and swung at Harry with his whip.

Harry dodged the flick of the lash, lunged and grabbed the driver by the front of his black greatcoat. "Who hired you to plant me there?"

"It was the merest coincidence, sir," the youth told him. "My employers would never condone a sidewalk assassination."

"Who are you working for?" asked Harry, shaking the driver.

The young man wrenched free of Harry's grip on him. Striking Harry across the chest with the handle of the whip, he twisted up out of his seat. He jumped free of the cab.

As the driver hit the walkway at the side of the bridge, Harry grabbed the reins and shouted, "Whoa!"

The horse halted. Harry climbed down.

He was just in time to see the driver toss aside his greatcoat and dive off the bridge toward the river below.

Harry sprinted to the ornamental, waist-high railing and looked down. He saw a coal barge and a red and gold houseboat steaming by down there, but there was nary a sign of the driver.

"I don't think I'll pursue him any further," Harry decided.

The newly installed electric chandeliers added an extra sparkle to the crystal, silver, and crisp white tablecloths in the vast, crowded dining room of the Hotel Pandora.

Harry rested an elbow on their table, watching Jennie Barr with his left eye narrowed. "Admittedly, Jennie, we're close friends, even though we don't encounter each other that often. But I don't like to discuss current cases or — "

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"All right," the young woman cut in, "don't admit that we're in St. Rolandsburg for the same darn reason."

"What I think is that the *New York Daily Inquirer* assigned you to trail after me to get another sensation-ridden story for that yellow sheet that employs you."

"Hooey," rejoined the auburn-haired reporter. "I arrived here two days before you, Harry. I was dispatched to investigate the rumors that the woods around Westerman Castle are haunted. As you know, I specialize in newspaper stories dealing with the weird and unusual."

On the small elevated bandstand, which was partially screened by potted palms, a formally attired string quartet was attempting Mozart.

Harry tried his champagne. "Okay, you're not tailing me," he conceded. "And, again, thanks for warning me about the falling gargoyle."

Jennie sighed. "If somebody had planted me in such an obvious spot to have a huge piece of stoneware dumped on my head, I think I would've had the common sense to look upward." She pointed a finger at the high, stained glass ceiling of the restaurant.

"Probably so."

"It's a wonder they didn't have an *X* chalked on the pavement where they wanted you to stand — or perhaps a bull's-eye," said the reporter. "Honestly, Harry, I worry about these lapses of acumen that you display now and then."

"I was woolgathering," he admitted.

She shook her head. "Too bad you let that lout escape."

"Escape or drown, not sure which."

"And you didn't find anything when you climbed up into St. Roland's?" She assumed a guileless expression.

"I found some local police and evidence that one of the gargoyles had been crowbarred from his longtime roost." He tapped his forefinger against the stem of his glass. "You were up there before I was, weren't you?"

Jennie nodded, smiling. "While you were off ruining my rented bicycle, yes," she acknowledged. "Ahead of the law, too."

"The agency will pay for the bike. Now what did you find?"

Extracting a leather-covered notebook from her purse, Jennie carefully set it atop the table and opened it.

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Pressed between the pages was a yellow rose. "This was lying near the base of the absent gargoyle. Suggest anyone?"

He picked up the flower, frowning. "Damn, is she in Urbania?"

"Opening Friday at the Theatre Royale here in St. Rolandsburg. Offering 'arias from the great operas.'"

He rubbed the yellow petals against his chin. "She's very fond of yellow roses," he said. "Lily Hope, second-rate singer and first-rate espionage agent for hire."

"It isn't the first time she's tried to kill you."

"Actually it's the fifth."

"Counting Cairo?"

"I've never been certain that the poisoned dart was her work."

"Sure, it was."

He shrugged. "Six, then. The point is, why does a master spy want to do me in?"

"Settling old scores maybe."

"Nope, Lily's more practical than that," he said with a shake of his head. "She only tries to knock me off when I stand in the way of one of her enterprises."

Reaching across, Jennie took hold of his hand. "Did Baron Westerman hire you to investigate this ghost of his?"

"He did, yeah," he answered. "And that's the sole reason for my being in this benighted land."

"But why would Lily be interested in a ghost?"

"Could be she's interested in the baron," suggested Harry. "Although the dossier I put together on him doesn't indicate any involvement with politics at all. Mostly he shoots game birds."

"He's also rumored to be not too bright."

"You can be not too bright and still get into politics. No indications, though, that the baron is."

"What do you think about his ghost?"

"Nothing yet. That's what I'm here to investigate."

"His wife's only been dead for a bit over three months," said Jennie. "If she is dead."

"Meaning?"

"The young lady, after having been married to the baron for not quite

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a year, disappeared one stormy midnight in the waters of a handy lake. She left a suicide note behind."

"And hasn't been seen since."

"Except in ghostly form, or so some locals swear."

"Dead or alive, the Challenge International Detective Agency gets its fee."

"Yes, I know." Jennie leaned back in her chair. "Are you taking the 11:15 to Westermanville tonight?"

"Planning to, yes. Are you?"

"No, Harry, I'm booked to take the 10:00 A.M. tomorrow morning."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the St. Roland and the Dragon Inn."

"So am I." He grinned. "We can have dinner tomorrow night."

"If I'm not out solving the mystery. After all, in the past I've — "

"Beg pardon, Mr. Challenge." A middle-aged bellboy in a gold-trimmed scarlet uniform was standing beside their table. A silver salver was held in his gloved left hand. "A message for you."

Harry dropped a gold coin on the plate, picked up the cream-colored envelope.

"Well?" inquired Jennie as he read the letter.

"It says," said Harry, clearing his throat, "'You missed death this afternoon. Next time you won't. Return to Paris.' Unsigned."

She took the letter when he handed it across. After studying it for a moment, Jennie said, "This looks a heck of a lot like Lily Hope's handwriting, doesn't it?"

"Quite a bit," he agreed.

THE RAIN, accompanied by some impressive lightning and thunder, commenced minutes after Harry's train pulled out of the station. Wind-driven rain whipped at the window of his compartment, the frequent flashes of bluish lightning illuminated the warehouses and stockyards on the outskirts of St. Rolandsburg and then the hilly countryside and vast pine forests.

Harry initially had the compartment to himself. He was smoking one of his thin black cigars, watching the stormy night the train was roaring

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through. He hadn't yet looked into the paper-covered Tauchnitz edition of the latest Anthony Hope novel that he'd taken out of his new suitcase. It sat unopened on the seat next to him.

"Beastly night." The corridor door had come sliding open to admit the very large man in clerical garb who lunged into the swaying compartment.

He thunked a large wicker picnic basket, which was overflowing with fat links of sausage and long loaves of dark bread, onto the seat across from Harry.

Shaking himself, doglike, he scattered drops of rain around the swaying compartment. "Frightfully sorry if I've spattered you, old man."

Harry, grinning thinly, said, "I'm wondering how you got wet, since it wasn't raining when the train pulled out."

Taking off his wide-brimmed priestly hat and tossing it atop his basket, the large, wide man pointed a thumb at the ceiling. "I was up on the roof for a bit."

"Oh, so?"

"I often travel in such a manner when I'm on a mission," he explained. "Though not usually in such deucedly foul weather." He gave an appreciative nod. "You're a clever and perceptive fellow, Challenge."

Eyeing him, Harry said, "I take it you haven't dropped in to convert me to your faith."

"I'm a bit of an agnostic actually, old man. I toyed with Muscular Christianity for a spell, eventually found it dashed unsatisfying."

"I have the feeling that I've seen you before," said Harry, exhaling smoke. "I think it was at a circus in Budapest. You were the strongman."

Smiling briefly, he answered, "Yes, old man, I was known as the Mighty Orloff."

"You lifted a cow over your head."

"A bull," Orloff corrected.

"Even more impressive," said Harry. "And are you the fellow who pried the gargoyle off St. Roland's earlier in the day?" Harry took a long drag on his cigar, causing the tip to sparkle redly.

The spurious clergyman nodded, accepting responsibility. "We would have got you if that intrusive newspaper girl hadn't spoiled things."

"*We* being you and Lily Hope?"

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The big man nodded again, scowled. "I'll tell you, dear chap, I also happen to have a personal grievance against you."

Taking another puff on his cigar, Harry said nothing.

"Damme, if I don't suspect that Lily's sweet on you."

"That most recent token of her affection doesn't suggest an overwhelming passion for me."

"The dear lady was, to my eye, almost pleased that you'd escaped being squashed," he said. "Made me devilishly jealous for a bit, I must say. So that when I do away with you now, Challenge, I'll be, as it were, killing two birds with one stone."

Harry pointed out, "Since Lily's dispatched you to try again, she can't be harboring too much in the way of fond feelings for me."

"I'm blessed if I don't suspect she'd be pleased if I failed to kill you."

"Why exactly are you and Lily interested in the ghost of Valeria Westerman?"

"We're not, old boy. We're interested in her romantic entanglements," replied Orloff. "And now let us get down to...Oof!"

Harry had all at once flicked his burning cigar into the would-be assassin's face. The lit end hit him smack between the eyes, scattering sparks.

When the erstwhile strongman brought up his hands to rub at his eyes, Harry raised up partially to deliver a substantial kick into his groin.

The big man howled, stumbled backward, sat on his picnic basket, snapping a loaf of bread in two. Roaring in anger, he began to charge at Harry. Then he stopped.

Harry had his .38 revolver in his hand, aimed at the strongman's midsection. "Let's chat about what you and dear Lily are really up to, old man," he suggested.

"I shall never betray her."

"Would a few bullets in various parts of your body persuade you to modify that stand?"

"Never!" He suddenly grabbed up the basket and flung it straight at Harry.

Hit in the chest with the heavy assortment of comestibles, plus two bottles of cheap red wine, Harry stumbled backward and landed on the seat.

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Orloff yanked open the inside door, went running along the swaying corridor.

Disentangling himself from the picnic fare, Harry, gun in hand, dived out of the compartment.

Orloff was at the end of the car. As the train slowed around a curve, he stepped into the passway between cars.

When Harry reached the passway, he found that the door to the outside was flapping open. The Great Orloff had apparently leaped from the train out into the rainswept woodlands beyond.

Reaching out and tugging the door shut, Harry observed, "I guess you should never underestimate a strongman."

IT WAS ABOUT ten minutes shy of one A.M. that evening when Harry got his first glimpse of the ghost.

The carriage from the inn was carrying him from the train station along a quirky road that passed through a dark forest. The rain continued heavy; thunder rumbled off among the trees. Then there was a great, crackling flash of lightning off to the right of the speeding carriage.

Harry turned toward it as the forest was briefly illuminated.

"Damn, there she is!"

He saw, lit up by the lightning, a heavy white cloak over the slender shoulders of the misty, insubstantial figure of an otherwise unclothed young woman. She was walking, slowly and stiffly, along a woodland path some hundred feet in from the roadway.

Thrusting his head out of the coach window, Harry shouted, "Stop this contraption."

The driver shouted back, "Nobody ever stops in Witchwood after dark, sir."

He cracked his whip. The two horses increased their speed.

Twisting on his seat, Harry looked back.

The forest was dark again.

He decided not to jump from the fast-moving carriage.

Frowning, he leaned back and lit a fresh cigar.

"Pack of superstitious louts, don't you know," observed Captain Amos Waverly. "Entire blooming country is that way. Worse than bloody

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England when it comes to giving credence to old wives' tales. Toby there's smarter than the whole and entire populace of Urbania."

Toby was the small pugnacious bulldog who was gnawing diligently at Harry's left boot, backside wiggling, low growls sounding deep in his gray chest.

"Shoo," suggested Harry, again turning his attention to signing the St. Roland & the Dragon register.

The captain, apparently the proprietor of the inn, was a large, heavyset man in his early sixties. Bald, bewhiskered, and pink, he was wearing a tasseled nightcap and a vast Japanese kimono over a candy-striped flannel nightshirt. He was leaning on Harry's side of the registration desk, a knobby cane in his hand and his right foot swathed in considerable windings of bandages. "Toby, my lad, abandon our guest's foot, do you hear."

Toby ignored him, growling more fervently.

Harry said, "You don't believe Witchwood is haunted?"

"Haunted, my aunt," said the captain. "No such thing as spooks, old chap."

"What, in your opinion, have folks been seeing in the woods of an evening lately?"

"Same thing you saw." The captain leaned, tapping the bulldog gently on the backside with the tip of his cane. "Suspend your unseemly behavior, Toby. No doubt, Challenge, you sighted a wandering guest from that decadent artist's hideaway."

"Which artist?" Bending, Harry plucked the bulldog off his foot, holding him by his studded collar. "Begone or face extinction."

The dog, placed back on the plank flooring, went waddling off to sprawl in front of the stone fireplace.

"Now that's the way to handle Toby. Firmly, no nonsense," said the captain approvingly. "Far too many mollycoddles in the world today. Especially in Urbania. Thought it was bad in England, moved here, found it far worse, I must say."

"Which decadent artist?"

"One of these bright chaps, Dr. Owen Rumsford," replied Captain Waverly. "Been occupying Milverton Manor for close to a bloody year. Far too *modern* in his outlook, paints loathsome pictures of unclothed

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women, indulges in strange drugs, is possibly a vivisectionist *and*, so I hear — and you can never completely trust the word of the local nitwits — stages nocturnal orgies on the premises with alarming frequency. You no doubt glimpsed some drink-crazed creature stumbling about the woods near the manor house in a disgraceful state of dishabille."

"She looked, during the brief glimpse I caught, much too insubstantial to have strayed from an orgy," he said, shaking his head. "So Dr. Rumsford lives hereabouts, huh?"

"You've heard of the scoundrel?"

"Yeah, in addition to being a noted painter, he has a considerable reputation as a scientist," answered Harry. "An unorthodox scientist."

"That's Rumsford, to be sure. Decidedly unorthodox." The innkeeper yawned. "Now then, Challenge, let me hobble upstairs, as best I can though suffering from this blasted gout, and show you to your room. You remain below, Toby."

Stretching to his feet, the bulldog followed them up the shadowy staircase.

Baron Westerman spoke English with a slight Urbanian accent. "There, Herr Challenge, is my dear departed Valeria," he said, gesturing at the unfinished painting resting on the easel at the exact center of the cluttered drawing room.

The portrait showed a slim blonde young woman with long, curly Pre-Raphaelite hair. She was perhaps twenty-five, wearing an off-the-shoulder white satin gown and an ornate emerald necklace. The painting stopped just above her waist. The lower third of the canvas was, except for some preliminary pencilling, blank white.

"A very handsome young lady." Harry made his way over to the painting, skirting a clawfooted table that had a stuffed marsh hawk perched on a stand atop it.

"Ah, yes, well might you emphasize the word *young*, Herr Challenge, since I am much older than poor — "

"I didn't, actually." He studied the portrait for a few silent seconds. "This was painted by your neighbor, Owen Rumsford, wasn't it?"

"That blackguard," muttered the short, amply bearded baron. "When he first moved into Milverton Manor, I knew only his considerable

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reputation as a portrait painter." He sighed, reaching over to ruffle the feathers upon the head of a stuffed grouse perched on an oaken sideboard. "I had yet to learn that Rumsford was an immoral reprobate who lived a licentious life and dabbled in the black arts."

"Chemistry isn't officially ranked as one of the black arts." Turning away from the unfinished portrait of the dead woman, Harry crossed to one of the French windows.

The early afternoon sky outside was gray; a flock of ravens came fluttering down to land on the misty lawn of the formal garden that stretched away from the mansion.

"Be that as it may," said Baron Westerman, jamming his small fists down deep into the pockets of his velvet smoking jacket. "Once I was apprised of Rumsford's true nature, I banished him from my home."

Harry turned to face his client. "How soon after that did your wife disappear?"

"Valeria did not disappear, Herr Challenge," corrected the baron. "The poor child threw herself into the waters of Lake Nebel. I showed you the suicide note she left neatly folded up with all her garments beside its dark waters. She simply said that she was too unhappy to go on living." He pointed at a window. "The lake borders the northern acres of my estate."

"Cold, jumping into a lake naked." Harry took out a thin cigar. "You say you had the lake dragged?"

"Yes, but it's very deep and no trace of poor Valeria was ever found." The baron wiped at the corner of his eye with his thumb knuckle, sniffling. "What bothers me now, now that I've accepted the grim fact that she is no longer alive, is that her perturbed spirit must wander the woods bordering my estate."

"Bordering Dr. Rumsford's place, too."

Westerman sighed once more. "I want you — which your estimable father assures me you are fully capable of doing, Herr Challenge — to confront my late wife's restless ghost. You must make certain that she is freed from this earthly realm and goes on to her reward in Heaven "

Lighting his cigar with a wax match, Harry asked, "Have you seen her yourself?"

Commencing to sob quietly, he replied, "I am no coward, Herr

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Challenge, yet I cannot bring myself to venture into Witchwood by night. Seeing my poor departed Valeria in spirit form would be too much to bear."

"But you're certain it's she?"

"I've had descriptions — from some of my tenants and from the village postman who was returning from a nocturnal visit to his fiancée," the baron replied. "Yes, I believe that the spirit of my dead wife has come back to haunt me."

"She'd have a better chance of doing that if she showed up some place inside the house here." He nodded toward the misty garden. "Or right outside. Your garden would make a fine site for a haunting."

Frowning deeply, the baron asked. "What are you suggesting, sir?"

Harry shrugged, exhaling smoke. "Merely being curious," he answered. "Does she appear *every* night?"

"There seems to be no regular pattern to her materializations. In the weeks since she started appearing in Witchwood, she's showed up three nights in a row and then missed a week."

"And she usually shows up around midnight," said Harry. "Okay, I'll start roaming Witchwood every night until I spot her."

"Please, don't harm Valeria. Don't put any spells on her that will doom her to eternal damnation or — "

"I'm a detective," reminded Harry. "Very few spells do I cast."

Nodding, the baron invited, "If you're intending to enter the woods this evening, Herr Challenge, might I suggest that you stop by here for a late dinner beforehand?"

"Not this evening, baron," he said. "I already have a dinner engagement."

HARRY WAS ADJUSTING his shoulder holster when someone knocked on the oaken door of his beam-ceilinged room. It was a foggy night and thick gray mist pressed against the leaded windows.

Putting on his coat, Harry said, "Yeah?

"It's Captain Waverly, my boy," said the innkeeper. "Accompanied by the faithful Toby."

Moving to the door, Harry opened it. "Any word from Jennie Barr?"

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The captain gave a forlorn shake of his head. "The young lady, alas, has still not returned from her early afternoon stroll," he answered. "Though an optimist, I must admit that I am growing increasingly concerned."

"So am I."

When Harry returned from his client's estate, he'd learned that Jennie had arrived at St. Roland & the Dragon, signed in and, after freshening up, gone out. She'd left a note for Harry telling him she was expecting to join him for dinner. The captain she had told she was going to take a stroll in the woodlands.

The day had ended, night had closed in, but Jennie had not returned to the inn. It was now a few minutes short of eight.

"Perhaps a search party is in order," suggested Captain Waverly. "My gout prevents me from participating in such an activity, more's the pity, but I can volunteer my stable boy and — "

"I'll find her." Buttoning his coat, Harry stepped out into the corridor.

Toby growled by way of greeting him.

"Keep in mind, my dear Challenge, that Witchwood by night can be a dangerous place."

"Nevertheless." He shut his room door, headed for the shadowy stairway.

"Allow me to loan you the services of the staunch Toby."

"For what — company?"

"You'll find him an excellent tracker. Although his scrunched up little nose doesn't look all that impressive, I can assure you that — "

"All right, if he promises not to bite me," Harry conceded. "And we'll need something that belongs to Jennie, for the scent."

"I've already thought of that." From a pocket of his ample Norfolk jacket, the captain removed a plaid scarf. "Took the liberty of extracting this from one of Miss Barr's traveling cases."

"That'll do." Somewhat gingerly, Harry held the scarf near the bulldog's nose. "This is who we're hunting for, Toby."

After sniffing thoughtfully, Toby made a brief attempt to nip Harry's fingers.

"Merely being playful," explained the innkeeper. "I'm expecting you to accomplish your mission, Toby."

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A few moments later, Harry, carrying a bull's-eye lantern, was following the bulldog into the woods beyond the inn.

Less than a minute after a distant bell tower struck eleven, Harry saw the ghost again.

So did Toby, who commenced barking.

"Hush," Harry advised the dog.

About sixty feet away, on a narrow trail that ran parallel to the one along which the sniffing bulldog had been leading Harry, the blurred figure of a woman could be seen.

Draped over her shoulders was the long white cloak. What could be seen of her naked body seemed transparent; only the coating beads of mist gave it form and substance.

"She's not a ghost," realized Harry. "No, somehow — and I'm going to have to find out how — she's become invisible. If she weren't splotched with fog, you wouldn't see anything but that damned cloak."

He was about to start pushing his way through the misty brush and trees that separated him from the stiffly walking young woman. But then Toby spun suddenly around, alternating between barking and growling.

Harry never got to see what the object of the dog's agitation was. As he started to turn, someone conked him on the back of the head. Twice again with something heavy and metallic.

He heard the dog yelp once before he fell forward, lost consciousness, and was surrounded by mist.

Harry awoke to find a bare female foot floating a yard or so from him.

He himself, thoroughly trussed up with thick hempen rope, was sprawled, face down, amidst old straw on the dirt floor of what had once been a cow barn.

As he inhaled and exhaled slowly, he noticed a second foot floating near the other one. Both of them looked as though they belonged to a young woman, a well-groomed, upper class young woman.

"Since you're groaning, Harry, I assume you're awakening," observed a familiar voice to his left.

"I rarely groan," he said, lifting his head and twisting to the left, "except while reading one of your newspaper yarns."

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Jennie Barr, wearing a rumpled plaid traveling suit, was tied to a straight-back wooden chair that sat on the barn floor about ten feet from him. The large hollow structure was lit only by a kerosene lantern that dangled from a nearby stanchion. The reporter's auburn hair was tangled and there were smudges of dirt on her face.

She said, "This isn't the place for literary criticism, Harry. What we — "

"You're a *reporter*? Good heavens, had I known that I would never have confided in you." The voice came out of the empty air.

Harry, lifting his head, saw that there was a second bentwood chair sitting there. Ropes floated, apparently holding an unseen young woman in place.

"You must be Valeria Westerman," said Harry, "alleged ghost."

"That she is," confirmed Jennie. "They brought her in along with you, only she wasn't out cold. We've been passing the time chatting while waiting for you to come out of your stupor. Although, as I explained to Valeria, it's sometimes difficult to tell your stupor from your normal — "

"I've committed another serious error," said the unhappy invisible woman. "I should never have told you all I did, except that I supposed you, like myself, were no more than a hapless prisoner of these fiends."

"I'm a reporter, sure, but I'm as hapless as you."

"Which specific fiends are we talking about?" inquired Harry. "Would that be Lily Hope and the Mighty Orloff?"

Jennie answered, "Lily is the one who caught me snooping around this abandoned farm earlier in the day and tossed me in here, yes. If Orloff is a big muscle-bound oaf, then he's the other fiend."

Harry nodded as best he could toward the slowly materializing young woman. "I take it, Baroness, that you ran off to join Owen Rumsford after faking your suicide."

"I have no further comments to make," said the nearly invisible woman. "Who are you, may I ask, another prying journalist?"

"A detective, hired by your husband."

She sighed. "This grows more hopeless by the moment," Valeria said forlornly. "My shame will be made known to the world through the pages of a yellow journal and then my dull, tedious, bird-obsessed husband will discover that I'm not dead at all and drag me back to that taxidermy-infested pile."

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"None of that," Harry pointed out, "is going to happen unless we get free of this barn."

Jennie asked, "Would you care to know why the lady's invisible?"

"Is my shame to be broadcast far and wide?"

"Only to Harry just now, Baroness."

Harry hunched his shoulders, flexed his hands. "Rumsford is a maverick scientist, greatly interested in coming up with weapons and gimmicks that can be sold for use in the many wars and skirmishes now taking place around the world. In the past he's made more money from that sideline than he has from his paintings."

"Well, you're not as dense as usual," said Jennie with a touch of admiration in her voice.

"You wouldn't be as fond of me as you are if I were actually dense." He shifted his position on the bovine-scented straw, bringing his knees up as far as the ropes would allow. "I figure Rumsford is working on a formula to make soldiers — and maybe spies — invisible. To test his invention, he tried it out on Valeria here. Though I can't quite guess his reason for letting his sample invisible woman wander in the woods by night."

"She sleepwalks," provided Jennie. "He tries to keep her locked up at home nights, but when he gets distracted by his laboratory work or his painting, he forgets. Valeria tosses a cloak over her invisible shoulders and wanders around Witchwood until she wakes up."

Harry spoke in the direction of the floating feet. "Why exactly did you let Rumsford experiment on you, ma'am?"

"He's a very seductive, very persuasive fellow." The fingers of her left hand were now also visible. "And, of course, he convinced me this was a humanitarian experiment and had nothing to do with any ongoing conflict. I dearly wish I'd never fallen under his spell."

Jennie mentioned, "Apparently you don't stay invisible all the time."

"No, that's what has necessitated Owen's injecting me repeatedly in the backside with his vile potion. I found out that he can't sell his formula to any foreign power unless he can guarantee it will keep a user safely invisible for at least ten hours. So far I've never remained unseen for more than five."

"Lily, I imagine, knowing Rumsford's reputation, guessed what the ghost of Witchwood really was," said Harry, rolling to the right. "She

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came out here, grabbed Valeria and plans to trade her back to Rumsford in exchange for this invisibility formula."

"I fear," said the young woman, "that he no longer values me that much."

Jennie frowned down at the writhing Harry. "Whatever are you doing?"

"It's a trick my magician friend the Great Lorenzo tried to teach me once," he replied. "He calls it the Marvelous Escape Trick in his traveling magic show."

"Did he succeed in teaching it to you?"

"We'll see."

"How is Lorenzo?"

"When I last had a cablegram from him, he was playing in the capital city of Graustark."

Valeria sighed again. "Ah, my distant homeland," she said. "Would that I were safely back there and free of both the Baron and Owen Rumsford."

Harry grunted, straining at the thick ropes. Then he said, "I might be able to arrange that if — "

"Good news!" Orloff, dressed in an Inverness overcoat, had stepped into the barn from out of the misty night. "Lily, after considerable cajoling on my part, has consented to allow me to sink you in Lake Nebel, Challenge."

"That is good news, yeah," said Harry.

THE MIGHTY ORLOFF'S boots crunched on the shale beach that bordered the mist-shrouded Lake Nebel. Unseen night birds were hooting in the dark forest they'd just passed through.

Slung over the former strongman's broad shoulder, Harry remarked, "For a fellow who once lifted a full-grown cow over his head, you're sure huffing and puffing."

"It was a bull," the big, wide man corrected. "Besides, dear chap, your twisting and writhing doesn't make carrying you down to the lake all that easy."

"The thought of my impending death gives me the fidgets."

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"That will cease once I fill your various pockets with heavy stones and shot-put you into your watery grave, Challenge."

"I'm curious," said the restless Harry.

"As to how deep the lake might be? The guidebooks inform us that Lake Nebel is close to bottomless. Not that the fact will make any difference to — "

"No, about whether Dr. Rumsford has agreed to trade his invisibility formula for the safe return of Valeria."

Orloff halted, still about ten yards from the waters of the night lake. "How the devil did you come to know about that?"

"I'm a detective," he reminded the strongman.

"That's most interesting, that is. Lily has assured me on more than one occasion that you aren't as simple as you appear, yet I failed to believe her," said Orloff. "I had assumed her schoolgirl affection for you simply clouded her judgment."

Harry persisted. "Is Rumsford going to make the trade?"

Orloff made a resigned noise. "This very night at one A.M. in the old barn," he said. "The doctor will hand over his notebooks and his entire supply of the invisibility potion." He took two steps forward. "We have several interested potential clients among the major nations. As to what we'll eventually do with the petite Miss Barr, we haven't as yet — "

"It does work," announced Harry.

"What works, old man?"

"My friend Lorenzo's rope escape trick." Harry, shedding his bonds, dropped to the beach. Scooping up a large stone, he reached up and smacked Orloff across the temple with it several times.

The strongman collapsed on the shale.

The barn was on fire.

Harry saw the flames while he was still hurrying back through the misty forest.

He started running, dodging oaks and maples.

The right wall of the old structure was afire, flames crackling and climbing up into the night. Smoke was swirling, mixing with the fog.

He was trotting past the rundown farmhouse when someone hailed him. "I advise you to stop, Harry dear."

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Halting, he turned to see Lily Hope stepping out from behind a gnarled tree. She held what looked to be a filigreed dueling pistol in her gloved hand. The flames from the burning barn two hundred feet away made its barrel sparkle.

She was a handsome woman, about Harry's age and ten pounds heavier than when he'd last encountered her. Lily wore a long dark velvet cloak over her scarlet gown and her currently blonde hair was piled high on her head and was studded with quite a few glistening diamonds.

"Don't have time for a chat, Lily. There are two women in that damn barn,"

"Yes, isn't that rather a pity."

"I'm going in after them."

"I imagine your dear friend Jennie Barr managed to knock over the lantern in her hopeless struggles," said the international spy and soprano. "I was dozing when I became aware of the conflagration."

"You need the baroness and she's in there, too."

Lily shrugged. "We can simply waylay dear Dr. Rumsford while he's on his way here," she said. "In a way, Harry, it's much simpler and cleaner if Valeria is dead."

"Like hell." He spun, started running again.

"I'll shoot you, Harry. You mustn't doubt that."

He continued to run, closing the distance between himself and the barn.

"I shall count to three," Lily called. "If you don't halt, I'll shoot you in your handsome back."

He was almost to the entrance to the flaming building.

"One."

He reached the threshold.

"Two."

Just as he was about to enter the smoke-filled barn someone off in the fog a few yards away said, "Ninny, you don't have to go in there."

Harry stepped back, staring into the mist at his left.

"We got out," said Jennie. "But I knocked over the darn lantern when I tipped my chair over to smash it and loosen the ropes."

"How's Valeria?"

"Right here hunkered down with me, and about fifty-sixty percent

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visible now. We were about to go looking for you when I heard you come lumbering through the woods."

"Three," announced Lily, striding over to where Harry was standing. "Ah, your little reporter and the baroness have escaped. Don't make an attempt to flee, any of you."

"I wonder," put in Valeria, who was huddled behind the now-standing Jennie, "if I might borrow your cloak, Miss Hope. My visibility is now nearly total and I'm naked."

"All of you come away from this potential inferno and back to the farmhouse," ordered Lily. "Harry can loan you his coat."

Easing out of his coat, Harry handed it toward the nearly visible baroness, eyes averted.

"I saw you sing once in the opera house in the capital of Graustark," said Valeria, shivering in spite of the donated coat and increasing heat from the burning barn. "I must say, Miss Hope, that you seemed far more amiable upon the stage than you do tonight."

"A dreadful old pile, your ramshackle opera house." Lily backed away from the barn, beckoning them with the pistol to come along.

"By the way," said Harry as they began marching toward the old house, "you've probably realized that Orloff didn't succeed in sinking me in the picturesque waters of Lake Nebel."

"So that's why you're running around loose." She stopped, frowning at him. "I gave no such order."

"So you are still fond of me."

"Not at all, Harry, I was planning to shoot you before Dr. Rumsford arrived. What did you do to Orloff?"

"Slugged him, tied him up with the ropes he'd used on me. He's slumbering beside the lake and you — "

An angry growling interrupted Harry.

From out of the surrounding mist came Toby. He dived at one of Lily's plump ankles and sank his teeth into it.

She cried out in pain. "You nasty little beast," she said, twisting to aim the gun at the snarling bulldog.

Stepping forward, Harry socked her on the chin.

As Lily slumped, passing out, he extracted the pistol from her slack fingers.

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"Ungentlemanly," observed Valeria. "Yet most effective, Herr Challenge."

"Yes, that was very helpful, Harry," added Jennie. "Who's the hound?"

Bending, Harry took hold of the dog and pulled him away from the fallen spy's boot. "This is Toby from the inn. I was wondering what had become of him."

Valeria sighed one of her forlorn sighs. "Alas, now that I'm free I must either return to my annoyingly mundane husband or resume being an increasingly reluctant guinea pig for Owen Rumsford."

"Not necessarily," Harry told her.

THERE WAS A DIFFERENT string quartet playing in the immense dining room of the Hotel Pandora. But their grasp of Mozart was only a shade better than that of their predecessors.

Since it was early evening, the place was only partially filled. The fashionable citizens of St. Rolandsburg rarely dined before ten.

Jennie, wearing yet another checkered traveling suit, clinked her champagne glass against Harry's, grinning. "You really possess very little in the way of integrity."

"On the contrary, I'm actually almost noble in my dealings with the world."

"You completely failed in your handling of Baron Westerman's case," the reporter pointed out. "You collected your enormous fee, however, and lied to the old boy as — "

"I did exactly what he paid us for," he corrected. "The baron wanted the ghost to stop appearing in the woodlands surrounding his estate. She did. Nobody's seen her since."

"That's because you allowed Valeria to slip away to head back home to Graustark."

Harry nodded. "I decided she didn't belong with either of the gents in the case."

"Sometimes," admitted Jennie, "I admire your sentimental side."

Sipping his champagne, Harry said nothing.

"You handled Dr. Rumsford well, too," she continued. "Taking his

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notebooks and samples from him when he showed up for the expected exchange, then sinking everything in Lake Nebel."

"He'll probably start fooling with invisibility again. At least I've slowed him down some."

"I'm not as pleased over the fact that you let Lily Hope and that circus refugee escape."

Harry held up his hand in a stop-right-there gesture. "Lily, clever woman that she is, managed to get free of that shed I'd locked her in while we were dumping the Rumsford material in Lake Nebel. And, as you'll recall, when we reached the lake all we found were the ropes I'd used to truss up Orloff."

"Sure, he probably knows Lorenzo's rope trick, too." Jennie set down her glass. "Of course, I can't file a story about the ghost at all. Not and tell the truth."

"You have a sentimental side yourself."

"Matter of fact, I do," said Jennie. "When we worked together in Paris a couple of years ago, we were...well, quite friendly."

"We were," Harry agreed.

She said, "St. Rolandsburg isn't Paris, but...."

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CURIOSITIES

THE HOUSE ON THE STRAND, BY DAPHNE DU MAURIER (1969)

A TIME travel novel by Dame Daphne du Maurier? She's the acknowledged mistress of romantic melodramas like *Rebecca* and *Jamaica Inn*, and the writer behind Hitchcock's *The Birds*, but sf?

In 1969, desperate for something interesting to read, I headed for my father's bookshelf. There I found du Maurier's latest — *The House on the Strand*. Despite initial reluctance, I was soon happily treading the straw-strewn floors of fourteenth-century England with Richard Young. He tries an experimental drug developed by his biophysicist chum Magnus that transports his awareness — but not his body — to a Cornish manor house.

Inevitably, he soon gets involved in the lives and loves of the house's occupants, albeit as a ghost from their future. The adulteries, betrayals and murders of five hundred years past become more important than the banalities of his present. It's no wonder Young gets hooked, obsessed with going back to an age that rapidly seems realer than his own. But of course nothing good can ever come of drug dependency, and the dreamy high turns into nightmare. Is he really there, or is his subconscious merely escaping from his unhappy marriage into fantasy?

Strand is embroidered with period detail by du Maurier, whose awesome expertise in historical romance lends background credibility to the intrigues Young witnesses. But she never wrote the baser sort of bodice-ripper, and plot always stays supreme. Whenever we're in danger of getting lost in the Tudor era, we're yanked unceremoniously back to the sordid present along with Young. Until the next dose.

—David Westwood

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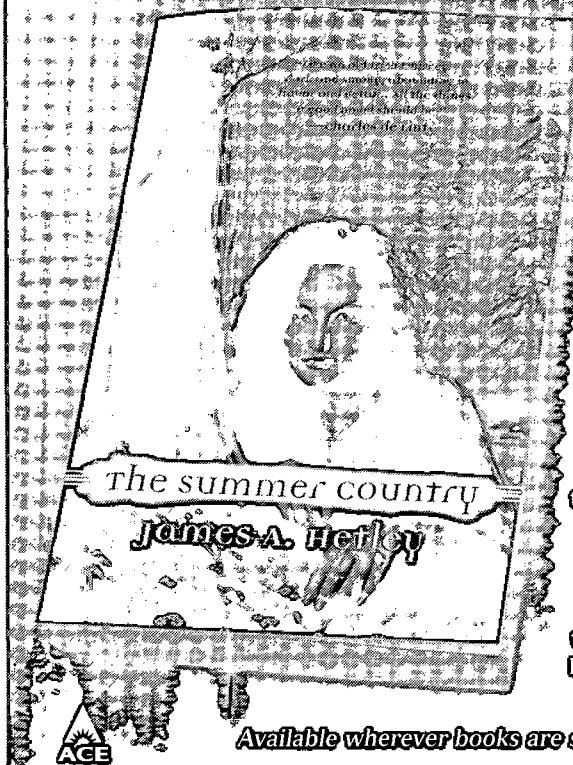

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